

Carol Duncan

“Mammy” in the Erotic Imaginary of Anais Nin

Mammy emerged as one of the most pervasive images of black womanhood from slavery and its aftermath in the United States. With her large buttocks and breasts, stout body, jet black skin, jovial nature (to white people—to black people, black men, in particular, she was definitely not “nice”), ever-present smile and kerchief on her head, mammy was the epitome of servility and sexual undesirability according to dominant Euro-American standards of beauty which value thinness and “whiteness.”

Mammy served a double purpose in the sexual and racial iconography of slavery and particularly in the post-slavery United States. On the one hand, she represented unquestioning loyalty to white supremacist structures of power in the form of the domestic service she performed in the plantation great house for the master and mistress and their children. On the other hand, as feminist scholar Barbara Christian noted in the documentary *Ethnic Notions*, the mammy stereotype effectively desexualized black women.

Maria St. John, in the essay “Cinematic and Fantasmatic Contours of Mammy: A Psychoanalytic Exploration of Race, Fantasy, and Cultural Exploration,” presents a psychoanalytic analysis of mammy as a source of fantasy “in the service of the construction of whiteness” (1991: 1). Her analysis focuses on the way in which the mammy stereotype, in general, and the character Mammy from *Gone With the Wind*, both the cinematic and literary texts, serves to reinforce the primary fantasy of race in the West which is essentialized “racial opposition” (1991: 1) between “blacks” and “whites.” In fantasies of mammy, this idea is expressed primarily in relations between black women and white women, especially, white women as “white mistresses” (1991: 5).

Mammy’s desexualized persona typified by her visualization as the foil of the “real” woman constructed in the nineteenth century “cult of true woman-

hood,” masked the sexual exploitation many black women suffered within the context of performing domestic service. The mammy thus functioned as a figure that legitimized enslaved servitude in the performance of domestic work while at the same time she nullified any consideration of black women as sexual beings and potential partners of white men within white households. Importantly, she also served to silence any consideration of black women as sexual victims. Mammy’s foil was the overtly sexualized Jezebel stereotype discussed as the “bad black girl” by K. Sue Jewell (1993). The “bad black girl” was a light-skinned, black woman whose “beauty” approximated that of the Euro-American norm and whose hypersexuality effectively erased the spectre of desire by (white) men for black women.

While Mammy was primarily represented as quintessentially asexual there are images of black women as a sexualized domestic workers who are potentially competitors with white women for the attentions of white men which appear in erotic texts such as two short stories written by Anais Nin (1903-1977) entitled “Saffron,” from *The Delta of Venus* (1977) and “Artists and Models” from *Little Birds* (1979). I chose to focus on Nin’s erotic writings because of their dual potential of articulating transgressive desires and the potential for subversion of the *status quo*. Indeed, Nin, is often popularly positioned as a writer who articulated women’s sexuality and desires in a distinctly female voice. Of course, the question that comes to mind here as many feminist scholars such as bell hooks (1992) and Audre Lorde (1984) have raised is: which women’s voice and whose sexuality? In other words, while there is the promise of transformation and transgression of images and stereotypes, erotica can often serve as a space in which these very same images are reinforced especially if the erotica that is produced is given the wide cultural sanction of “speaking for” that Nin’s has enjoyed.

Kobena Mercer’s (1994) analysis of photographer Robert Mapplethorpe’s photographs of black men, attests to this duality which ultimately reinforces stereotypic imagery through making the erotic subject a “fetish.” In the case of Mapplethorpe’s photographs of black men, racial stereotypes of black men as hypersexual were reinforced through the unrelenting focus on their penises in the photographs.

Nin’s two stories reinforce images of black women as hypersexual, silent bodies mute save for an indefinable sexual something made tangible by Nin as their “scent.” The stories, in effect, present a merger of the mammy and Jezebel stereotypes of black women which are themselves racialized images of the madonna/whore imagery which splits motherhood from sexuality. In the following essay, I explore Nin’s use of these dual images in relationships between black and white women and black women and white men. I suggest that in Nin’s stories, black women appear as conduits for the expression of white men’s and women’s sexualities. They function as agents of sexual change while they themselves remain forever silent and mute save for their bodies represented by their essential “scent.”

Scent of a (Black) woman

Anaïs Nin (1903-1977) was a member of a group of expatriate writers and artists including American writer Henry Miller who lived in Paris during the 1930s. She was born in France to a Danish-Cuban mother and a Catalan father. She grew up as a child, adolescent and young adult between France, Cuba and New York City. She was shaped by three languages—Spanish, French and English—and Cuban, urban Parisian and New York cultures although she published in English. Perhaps it is this “hybridity,” culturally and linguistically, that characterizes much of Nin’s works. I chose to focus on Nin because her writings and indeed her very image have become prominent in what can be called the canon of contemporary popular western erotica. Hollywood films such as *Nine and a Half Weeks*, *Wild Orchid*, and *Wide Sargasso Sea*, singer Madonna’s controversial 1992 book, *Sex*, and popular cable TV show *The Red Shoe Diaries* point to the impact of Nin’s quest to create a woman’s erotic voice in the visual terrain of contemporary popular cultural representations of women’s sexuality. Nin’s two collections of erotica, *Delta of Venus* and *Little Birds* are perhaps, her most well-known publications. Written on commission during the 1940s for a private collector, they became the basis of Nin’s fame and wealth in the latter years of her life in the 1970s.

Ironically, in terms of the topic of this paper, Anaïs Nin’s memory is evoked most widely in the popular cultural imagination through the perfume, by the cosmetics firm Cacharel, *Anaïs, Anaïs*, which bears her name. The irony of this naming lies in the fact that it is through scent that Nin evokes an essential black female sexual presence in two erotic stories, “Saffron” and “Artists and Models.” The “scent of a woman” for Nin is representative of female sexuality. In these two stories, Nin suggests that the essential sexual scent of a woman is fundamentally “black.” Here she reinforces stereotypic representations of blackness which have their roots in constructions of racial difference on the basis of claims that black people smelled fundamentally “different” (presumably more “animalistic”) than white people.

For example, in the trade card “Not Particular” which dates from the turn of the last century,¹ this stereotype of blackness tied to scent and literally “funky” sexuality is graphically demonstrated. Indeed, it is the crux of the rhyme which accompanies the caricatured images of a white gentleman (indicated by his dress in a suit) who is kissing a mammy wearing headtie, apron, and bare feet. The accompanying rhyme reads: “I know you’re not particular to a fault,/ Though I’m sure you’ll never be sued for assault,/ You’re so fond of women that even a wench/ Attracts your gross fancy despite her strong stench.”

While representations of this scent often focussed on the smell of black people as a sign of the inhumanity and so-called inherent bestiality and therefore undesirability of black people, Nin appropriates the image to suggest that the scent of black women is desirable and is the essential scent of “sex” itself. Scent here functions as a marker of race and an aspect of the racialized and sexed body which can potentially announce itself before visual imagery. Scent



unmasks that which “passing,” both racial and cultural seeks to hide.

In “Saffron” and “Artists and Models,” from the *Delta of Venus* (1977) and *Little Birds* (1979) erotica collections, respectively, black women who are employed as household workers in the homes of white families feature prominently in the erotic imagination and lives of the white male and female protagonists. It is through absorbing the smell of black women signified as saffron as a sign of black New Orleans women’s work in food preparation in “Saffron” and the odour of a black Martiniquian woman’s genitals in “Artists and Models” that the erotic potential of a white female and white male, respectively, is released.

In both stories, we are presented with black women as representatives of the archetype of the dark mother/dark harlot, one version of the madonna/whore image of womanhood and motherhood. The stereotype of Mammy as a nurturing, asexual mother, masks the fear of mammy as Jezebel with uncontrollable sexual desires. In Nin’s stories, both aspects of black women as madonna and whore, Mammy and Jezebel, are underscored through her characterizations of the anonymous black women servants with voracious sexual appetites who are identified primarily by their “voluminous skirts” and headties, the markers of the mammy stereotype. The stories serve to reinforce the wider binary of upper class white women as madonna and mother and all black women, even those who are madonna-mammies as whore when the close-up, intimate gaze of the writer, in this case, Nin is trained at mammy. While mammy is released from the stereotypic image of the asexual, docile, loyal, servant she is trapped immediately into the image of the hypersexual, silent, and unnamed bad-black-girl save for her “voluminous skirts” and headtie.

“Saffron,” is the story of Fay and Albert a couple in New Orleans whose marriage is unconsummated until Fay takes on the characteristics of a black woman through absorbing the smell of saffron while performing a task related to domestic work — buying an essential ingredient for a culinary dish. Albert, her much older husband, does not “consummate” his marriage with Fay through sexual intercourse. Fay discovers to her dismay that Albert instead engages in sexual relations with a black woman who is a domestic servant in the household:

She [Fay] decided to leave her room and walk until she could become calm again. Her entire body was throbbing. She walked down the wide staircase and out into the garden. *The perfume of the flowers almost stunned her.* The branches fell languidly over her and the mossy paths made her footsteps absolutely silent. She had the feeling that she was dreaming. She walked aimlessly for a long while. And then a sound startled her. It was a moan, a rhythmic moan like a woman’s complaining. The light from the moon fell there between the branches and

exposed a colored woman lying naked on the moss and Albert over her. Her moans were moans of pleasure. *Albert was crouching like a wild animal and pounding against her.* He, too, was uttering confused cries; and Fay saw them convulsed under her very eyes by the violent joys. (Nin, 1977: 133) [my emphasis]

Fay is both shocked and pained by her discovery which is precipitated by scent—first that of the flowers which foreshadows her discovery of Albert and “a colored woman.” Her discovery also raises questions for her about her “femininity” and identity as a woman:

Neither one saw Fay. She did not cry out. The pain at first paralyzed her. Then she ran back to the house filled with all of the humility of her youth, of her inexperience; she was tortured with doubts of herself. Was it her fault? What had she lacked, what had she failed to do to please Albert? Why had he had to leave her and go to the colored woman? The savage scene haunted her. She blamed herself for falling under the enchantment of his caresses and perhaps not acting as he wanted her to. *She felt condemned by her own femininity.* (Nin, 1977: 133) [my emphasis]

The femininity in question, though named in personal and intimate terms as Fay’s “own” is the construct of the passive “good” and “pure” woman as promoted by the nineteenth century cult of true womanhood. Following the initial discovery, Fay begins to notice Albert’s sexual relationships with the black women in the household:

And almost every day Fay saw shadows in the garden, shadows embracing. She was afraid to move from her room. The house was completely carpeted and noiseless, and as she walked up the stairs once she caught sight of Albert climbing behind one of the colored girls and running his hand under her *voluminous skirt.* (Nin, 1977: 135) [my emphasis]

While the time period of this story is not specifically mentioned, its physical setting of New Orleans, a big house with a fragrant garden where the white family lives and separate “colored girls’ rooms” temporalizes this story as the antebellum US South or the decades following the Civil War. Mammy’s time, in other words. While the black women — the “colored girls” — in the story, are not referred to as mammy, Nin’s reference to one of the unnamed women’s attire, her “voluminous skirts” (Nin, 1977: 135) makes the connection to mammy’s visual representation.

This scenario remains the *status quo* of sexual relations in the house until Fay goes to buy saffron for a rice dish which she and Albert are preparing for

“Spanish friends.” Nin is careful to note that Fay “seldom shopped” (Nin, 1977: 135) establishing her role as the mistress of the household. Fay is transformed in the performance of this unaccustomed domestic task:

When the little packages of saffron were handed to her, she tucked them in her bag, which she carried against her breast, under her arm. *The smell was powerful, it seeped into her clothes, her hands, her very body.* (Nin, 1977: 135) [my emphasis]

Following Fay’s absorption of the saffron scent, Albert upon smelling Fay, engages in sexual intercourse with her for the first time in their relationship. He exclaims “happily” afterwards, “You smell like a colored woman” (Nin, 1977: 136). Nin notes that “the spell was broken” (Nin, 1977: 136). Fay is transformed into a black woman through the scent of saffron, a spice used in the preparation of meals, a task from which she is largely divorced in the organization of labour in the household.

In another erotic short story by Nin, “Artists and Models,” a Martiniquian woman, a household servant, is vividly described by the male protagonist Millard as his “first sexual impression” (1979: 62). As in “Saffron,” the woman is once again unnamed and is present only through her physical characteristics of “light skin,” “head kerchief” and the ubiquitous “voluminous skirts” (Nin, 1979: 62). This image of a black woman as a household servant merges the physical characteristics of the mammy with that of the bad-black-girl in producing a sexualized black woman domestic worker. The bad-black-girl’s light skin as a result of her mixed race (European and African) heritage is merged with the “head kerchief” and “voluminous skirts” of the mammy to produce a sexualized image.

Like the story “Saffron,” smell plays a powerful role as a sexual stimulant in Millard’s story in “Artists and Models.” Noteworthy also is the association with animality in both instances. In the first story, this was indicated through the description of Albert’s sexual encounter with the black woman described by Fay in animalistic terms: “Albert was crouching like a wild animal and pounding against her” (Nin, 1977: 133). In “Artists and Models,” the woman at the centre of the group sexual encounter is transformed into an animal, a female dog, she figuratively became a “bitch,” after smoking marijuana and by extension through Millard’s association of an earlier memory of the black female house servant, she becomes a black woman. Millard recounts how this sexual scenario especially a friend “smelling [her] exactly as a dog would do” (Nin, 1979: 61) reminded him of his first “sexual impression” (Nin, 1979: 62) which was stimulated by the Martiniquian servant:

The night before, he had smoked marijuana with friends. He said, “Did you know that very often it gives people the feeling that they are

transformed into animals? Last night there was a woman who was completely taken by this transformation. She fell on her hands and knees and walked around like a dog. We took her clothes off. She wanted to give milk. She wanted us to act like puppies, sprawl on the floor and suckle at her breasts. She kept on her hands and knees and offered her breasts to all of us. She wanted us to walk like dogs — after her. She insisted on our taking her in this position, from behind, and I did, but then I was terribly tempted to bite her as I crouched over her. I bit into her shoulder harder than I have ever bitten anyone. The woman did not get frightened. I did. It sobered me. I stood up and then I saw that a friend of mine was following her on his hands and knees, not caressing her or taking her, but merely smelling exactly as a dog would do, and this reminded me so much of my first sexual impression that it gave me a painful hard-on.

As children we had a big servant girl in the country who came from Martinique. She wore voluminous skirts and a colored kerchief on her head. She was a rather pale mulatto, very beautiful. She would make us play hide-and-seek. When it was my turn to hide she would hide me under her skirt, sitting down. And there I was, half-suffocated, hiding between her legs. I remember the sexual odor that came from her and that stirred me even as a boy. Once I tried to touch her, but she slapped my hand. (Nin, 1979: 61-62)

While she is the "big servant girl" who was capable of slapping away his boy's hand, I could not help but wonder if she would have been able to rebuff him later on in terms of body-size as well as domestic household power relations. This image presents a motherly image which is frankly sexual in the relations between mother and child hinting at future sexual relations between not only white men and black women but white men and white women as well. In a sense, the two stories can be linked through positioning Albert in "Saffron," as the boy grown into manhood who completes the act of reaching under the "voluminous skirts" of mammy in his trysts with the black female domestic servants and ultimately with his wife through her scent/sensual transformation of saffron.

Conclusion

These two stories by Anaïs Nin reinforce the image of black women as sexualized others, distinct from the white people, especially white women, with whom they interact in their working roles as domestic servants. Yet, these black women are deeply implicated as sexual catalysts for the emergence of the white male and female characters' own sexuality. This observation raises several important questions in relation to the autobiographical imperative of much of Nin's writing. Autobiography though most explicit in the *Diaries*, for which

Nin is famous, which began as a letter to her absent father in 1914 as an eleven-year-old on her first trans-Atlantic voyage from France to live in New York City, also influenced her writing in other genres.

If Nin's writings are autobiographical, how, then, are we to read these stories in light of Nin's relationship with her own loyal, household servant, a black Caribbean woman named Millicent? How also are we to read them if we take into consideration that Nin often wrote aspects of her own life and those of others around her into her narratives? Are these black women from the Caribbean and from Louisiana, for instance, stand-ins for black women who worked in domestic service for the upper class of which Nin's mother's family was a part in late nineteenth and early 20th century Cuba? It is not possible within the scope of this essay to address these questions. I raise them, here however, as points of reflection for further analysis on the construction of racialized and sexualized identities both through an author's self-conscious narration of their own lives (Nin's *Diaries*) as well as their construction of other narratives in which they and others are reflected (the erotica).

Nin's erotic writings are perhaps her most-well known publications. The images that she produced in her best-selling collections of erotica, published in the latter years of her life, have potentially far-reaching implications for their impact on sexual and gender-based stereotyping given the popularity of her work. The importance, for me of Nin's erotica, is not whether or not these writings are among the best in a critical sense but it is their undeniable influence on contemporary, popular representations of female sexuality. It is hoped that my exploratory analysis of the appearance of images of black women in these two stories may further contribute to understanding the contemporary representations of racialized and sexualized bodies. Of specific concern here are the proliferation of overtly sexualized images of mostly dark-skinned, large-bodied, large-breasted women who are presented as objects of ridicule and spectacle in various media including greeting cards, print magazines, film, and the Internet. The erotic gaze is more often than not on these women's breasts. However these are not the idealized Playboy breasts of so-called "men's magazines" but Mammy's breasts! These breasts are no longer covered by an apron but displayed simultaneously as sexual objects and grotesque spectacle. Similarly, Nin's stories, disrobe black, female, domestic workers from below the ubiquitous "voluminous skirts," exposing them, as it were, to the stories' protagonists and to the readers as essentialized sexual creatures whose scent is their announcement.

I suggest that the figurative and literal stripping of black women in these two stories should be considered in light of the contradictory images of the sexed/non-sexed maternal, sexualized black body on which the contemporary, visual, pornographic images are based. This contradiction is also the basis of "racial collectibles" (including cheaply-produced cookie jars, figurines, post cards and other common, household items) which sometimes featured black women as the butt of sexual jokes. The connections between these crudely-

drawn stereotypic images (which proliferated in the late nineteenth and for the first half of the twentieth century, circulated through the wide availability of mass-produced, low-cost, consumer products), contemporary pornographic websites and other electronic media dedicated to fetishized black (though not exclusively so), maternal, sexual bodies should be explored. This exploration also needs to encompass "the erotic," including the erotica produced by Nin, which by name and reputation alone is not commonly thought of in association with these images. My last statement, in particular, and this paper, in general, is not meant as a repudiation of Nin's work, but is meant to underscore the need to make connections between different areas of cultural representation, including the erotic (read art in some people's estimation) and pornographic (read "smutty" in other people's estimation) in analyzing the ways in which raced and sexed bodies are constructed.

¹This image is part of the online collection of the Jim Crow Museum of Feminist Memorabilia at Ferris State University <<http://www.ferris.edu/news/jimcrow/>> and is used with permission. The museum is curated by David Pilgrim and the images of the artefacts are accompanied by contextualizing essays by James Thorp.

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