A Credit to their Race: Black Women and the Performance of Culture: A Review

Essay—-- *Mammy: A Century of Race, Gender, and Southern Memory* by Kimberly Wallace-Sanders. Ann Arbor, MI: U of Michigan Press 2008,208pp., $40.00 cloth, $25.95 paper. *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern* by Jayna Brown. Durham, N.C: Duke UP, 2008, 339pp, $84.95 hardcover, $23.95 paper. *Cuban Zarzuela: Performing Race and Gender on Havana's Lyric Stage* by Susan Thomas. Urbana, IL:U of Illinois Press, 2008, 264pp., $40.00 hardcover.

What these three books have in common is their intent. That intent is to bring new insights and fresh perspectives to topics that have not only influenced popular culture, but in some instances, have become infused into our racial imaginary. Black women as mammies, international entertainers, and as the force behind the development of the most popular form of entertainment in pre-revolutionary Cuba, are the subjects in these timely new tomes. Yet these works are also very different and deserve to be considered on their individual merits.

Kimberly Wallace-Sanders, *Mammy: A Century of Race, Gender, and Southern Memory.* When Hattie McDaniel won the Academy Award for best supporting actress for her portrayal of 'Mammy,' the devoted slave/servant in *Gone with the Wind* (1939), she said in her joyous acceptance speech that she wanted it to honor black womanhood and to be "a credit to her race." The twofold reaction of black leaders who praised this breakthrough for a black actor, but criticized the sassy but subservient character that she portrayed, reflect the contradictions that are inculcated in this weighted emblem of Americana. Who is Mammy and where did she come from? How did she come to embody the heavy burden of racial mythology and history?

These are questions at the core of this short treatise on this perennial, haunting figure in the American imaginary. The staying power of mammy's larger-than-life persona is wrought with all manner of psychological attachments and racial yearning. Her healthy, generously endowed pulchritude and happy visage have evoked both scorn and praise, while serving as a muse to visual artists such as Betye Saar, Murray De Pillars, and Any Warhol, and as the subject of scores of literary renderings. The fixation on mammy and its hold on the American psyche is a "troubled marriage of racial and gender essentialism," mixed with mythology and southern nostalgia, Wallace-Sanders argues. A professor at Emory University in Atlanta, she has been collecting mammy stories for many years. Her book is an attempt to sort through the stories and images to show how this incarnation of myth, biography, fiction, history, and culture merge to correlate with phases of America's race consciousness. More than a racial stereotype that simply offends right-thinking people, the mammy figure has served as the complex site of a Foucaultian-type contestation over the black woman's body— as mother and woman. Since mammy first appeared in southern usage in 1810, the term quickly became the name that referred to all black women who cared for white children. Wallace-Sanders' research builds upon from the work of K. Sue Jewell (*From Aunt Jemina to Miss America (1993)* and Michael Harris (*Colored Pictures* (2003)) and others who have distinguished between images of black women as Mammy and Aunt Jemima. Their cultural and commercial appropriations as examined by scholars such as Patricia Hill-Collins and Deborah Gray-White whose prodigious work has tackled the subject of black motherhood, Wallace-Sanders' main contribution is her larger point, which is that the omnipresent image of mammy has belied its changing nature. Using an

approach she calls "literary archeology," the author presents a chronology of mammydom to deconstruct its shifting semantics from the early 1800s to the present. She also aptly summarizes the myriad black response and resistance to the mammy figure overtime, including a discussion of Alice Randall's satiric and controversial novel, *The Wind Done Gone* (2001) that purports to tell the Margaret Mitchell classic from the point of view of an enslaved plantation dweller. We see how the continued use and re-casting of the mammy/Aunt Jemima image by black artists in many instances may confirm rather than dispel the original. Wallace-Sanders applauds artists such as Joyce Scott whose complex, multidimensional work shows complexity and imagination in telling this very old story anew.

This book would be a suitable supplement in women's literature courses, art history courses, and courses on black/American popular culture. Given the visual nature of the subject, the inclusion of color photography enhances the overall appeal for these multiple uses. There is much to recommend in this slim, but important volume.

Jayna Brown. *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern*, Duke UP, 2008. 338pgs. $84.95 *Babylon Girls* is a more ambitious undertaking than *Mammy*. It covers a broad spectrum of black female performativity with surprising detail and scope. The result is new discoveries about an overlooked subject in the history of American popular culture. While there have been studies, including Eric Lott's influential *Love and Theft,* that purportedly show how black performance styles, especially minstrelsy, captivated American entertainment during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, they have mostly spoken through a male voice. This has led to a misreading and devaluing of black women's central role in this hugely influential

enterprise, according to Brown. She remedies this by providing a genealogy of female performers from popular stars of the early burlesque of 1890 through the mid 1940s. These performers include established stars such as Josephine Baker, Florence Mills, and Ada Overton, as well as ones lesser known in America such as Belle Davis, Ida Forsyne, and Valaida Snow and Stella Wiley and the ubiquitous chorus line dancers. Brown weaves theory into this project of historical reclamation by characterizing these performances as acts of resistance to dominant race and gender scripts. Her research interrupts the narrative of provincialism often ascribed to black women by showing their transcontinental reach and ability to manipulate their white audiences, kow-towed by racial nostalgia. She shows that as performers these troupes and individuals were more well-travelled and worldly than most members of their audience. Brown admits that her book is "unruly and disobedient at times," and this prepares us for the sidebars, copious literary and historical references, and the incessant continent-jumping to show how the "most beleaguered disenfranchised citizens" came to represent America's core beliefs in freedom, equality , and opportunity (p. 8). In the first of seven well-researched chapters, Brown begins by examining the Touring Picaninny Choruses of the early 1900s-- the troupes of pre-pubescent children whose origin and appeal derived from antebellum slavery and the complex mixture of innocence and exploitation that black childhood stood for in white society. Another intriguing chapter studies the "Creole Queens and their performance in burlesque. The burlesque stage with its excess and luxuriance, allowed the agile and sexually expressive women to jettison the taboo against female pleasure. Their moving bodies were not contained and this "freedom" in northern and urban space allowed for innovation as well as the development of dances

such as the wildly popular and satirical cake walk, a slavery-derived exaggerated jig that mocked ol' massa— to massa's unknowing delight.

The final, and in some ways, most interesting chapter is the last one. It focuses on the international performers Josephine Baker, jazz trumpeter Valiada Snow, and vocalist Florence Mills, and it adds to our understanding and appreciation of their careers. All three Americans performers were well known and loved in Europe and their celebrity allowed them to escape the worst of early twentieth century American racism. Yet it left them little protection against the "complex web of racial pathologies" that were rampant in society. Brown sketches their lives and work in European capitals against the backdrop of colonialism and war to show how they individually and collectively, embodied the modern black subject—with all its possibilities and contradictions. Jazz trumpeter Valaida Snow, for example, was for long ignored by jazz historians despite her compelling story. She drew large crowds to her concerts in Denmark, even during the outbreak of war and occupation. Snow was later captured and sent to a concentration camp for a short time. Brown argues what seems to be a contradiction until you read further: that the lives of these artists transcended racial and geographic boundaries, even as they remained racialized. This book does not offer neat conclusions but sends us back to her somewhat vague notion of having an interest in "articulations between remote and local realms." Its contents, chosen appropriately, would be a valuable resource in Women's Studies, Performance Studies, and Africana Studies courses. The interesting questions that the book raises and the issues that it fleshes out provide details and a transnational context about the artistry of phenomenal black women performers on the international stage. All this speaks to the book's

ambition and expanse. The result is a work that refuses to be easily summarized, contained, or defined.

Susan Thomas, *Cuban Zarzuela: Performing Race and Gender on Havana's Lyric Stage,* Illinois UP, 2003. 264pgs. $40.00 The third book in this review has a diasporic reach that further confirms and extends our understanding of the multiple sites, unconfined by geography, where the appropriation of black performance styles in popular entertainment took hold. Zarzuela, an itinerant musical form imported from Spain that combined operatic tones and spoken dialogue, reached its zenith in the rapidly changing Cuban society of the 1920s and 30s. The conditions were ripe for the rise of family oriented musical entertainment to quench the musical palate of the rising bourgeoisie. Although gender stratification and racial hierarchies were inherent in Cuban society, Thomas argues that in *Zarzuela,* performed mostly by white women, the music itself was fraught with racialized and gendered interpretations that had deep social resonance beyond the performance stage. She draws a strong parallel with black-faced minstrelsy in the United States, the wildly popular stage shows in which the black body as 'other' became a means to define and privilege whiteness. In this well-researched book that purports to be the first in depth study of this musical form in Cuba, the author builds upon existing research on racialized performance by authors such as Jill Lane, Eric Lott, and Paul Gilroy. Her specific focus is on how blackface and other such performances adapted to the needs of the zarzuela audience and its critics. Applying her expertise as a music scholar and historian, Thomas provides literary and musical analyses of extant compositions and piano-vocal scores that were important in the development of the genre. Beginning with the fact that while the main audience for

zarzuela and many performers were middle class white women, the composers were white men. That volatile mix of race, class, and gender in the composition, production , and performance of zarzuela underscores the author's contention that the "hermeneutics" of this musical fad outlived its popularity and survived in other musical forms. The question is why. In six chapters that Thomas traces the development of musical theater in Cuba and the narrow band of representation that engulfed it. The introduction and deployment of racially loaded stereotypes such as the 'mulata,' the mixed-race beauty who is the object of male desire, and the 'negrito,' a black male persona who was either comic or tragic, remained fixed in Cuban cultural history long after zarzuela's heyday. As for white women, their representation on stage was also narrowly coded and long lasting as either the ingénue or the fallen woman . This book, given its focus on musical compositions, would be appropriate for a specialized gender and music course or a course on music in the African diaspora. Its copious bibliography can also be mined for valuable sources on gender and race in the history of international musical performance.

Taken together, these three books offer a wide geographical and cultural lens that challenges some conventional ideas and introduces new ones with race and gender in the forefront of their probes. They seek to unsettle settled history. As a result , these three books provide a fresh look at the multiple ways that women although often unacknowledged, were central to the cultural formations and representations of deeply psychological yearnings within mainstream and privileged society. This is especially true of black women whose work on stage and off, became infused into the imaginary of the white world. Whether "performing" the role of mammy on the plantation or on a

pancake box, or whipping European audiences into a frenzy with their dancing, playing, and singing, or being the impetus for white women entertaining themselves, they were at the nexus of history and memory confirming, as one of the authors has argued, that black women were instrumental in the shaping of the modern.

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Her recent publications include: *The Devil You Dance With: Film Culture in the New South Africa* (Illinois UP, 2009); *Richard Pryor: The Life and Legacy of a "Crazy" Black Man* (Indiana UP, 2008), and *Imaging Blackness: Race and Racial Representation in Film Poster Art* (Indiana UP, 2008).