

Silvia Castro Borrego, University of Malaga (Spain)

Abstract

The Black Sexual Body as Palimpsest in 19th Century Colonial North America

My paper will engage in black sexual politics in 19th century colonial North America and will analyze the mix-race female sexual body as a palimpsest—considering the codes which dictated that mix-race women were slaves and prostitutes. The paper will perform a textual analysis of Susan Straight’s novel *A Million Nightingales* (2006) which is written by a white author. This fact will allow me to investigate the portrayal of the tragic mulatta figure by both white and black authors, aiming at offering different approaches to hybridity, introducing the mulatta as a challenge to the ethics of slavery through the combination of narrative strategies. This study of the mulatta problematizes the idea that American and African American literature could be exclusively white or black in its subject matter, or in the historical experience, for as Barbara Johnson has argued, “cultures are not containable within boundaries” because the terms black and white imply “complex and interlocking cultural and linguistic phenomena.” Thus the mulatta character deflects from a conception of race that emphasizes the “either/or” approach. She represents in literature and in life itself someone who is “neither black nor white, yet both” (Sollors).

Whose little girl am I?

Anyone who has money to buy.

-Nina Simone

There is a group of white North American women writers who write about the impact of the Black experience in contemporary US society from a perspective of gender. Although this might not be an isolated phenomenon in the US novel, it certainly is a remarkable one. Among these writers are Sue Monk Kidd’s *The Secret Life of Bees* (2002), Kathryn Stockett’s *The help* (2009) and the third writer I’d like to refer to is Susan Straight author of *I Been in Kitchen’s Sorrows* (1993) and *A million nightingales* (2006). Even if Monk Kidd’s and Stockett’s novels have raised a lot of controversy and discussion, maybe because they have been made into movies thus

reaching a wider audience in this way, perhaps because of their problematic revision of the mammie stereotype, or perhaps because as white women they have dared to “intrude” into the world of female blackness, writing novels concerned with the trials and triumphs of black women in North America.

The third novelist I’d like to introduce has not reached so much attention nor heated discussions among readership and critics, but she has gained much attention not only for the craftsmanship of her prose, beautifully written, but for the literary representation of the inner lives of her black female protagonists. Although black scholar H. L. Gates jr. in his review of *I Been in Sorrows Kitchen* harshly criticized the Geechee protagonist, Marietta, for having too much dignity, the truth is that Straight constructs characters that defy historical considerations of black women’s sexualities and bodies as deviant, as victims, as disempowered objects of society, and writing with an accurate knowledge of American history and of the history of race relations in the US.

The discourse of the 19th century created the black woman’s body and her sexuality in the image of the Hottentot¹ female, a site where the black female and the prostitute converged, based on the “scientific” evidence of black women’s uncontrolled sexuality under the stigmata of sexual difference and deviance. The hegemonic discourse created by white males exposed their own fears of difference in the age of colonialism, and their need to control and regulate the black female rendered as the “other.”

Moreover, black women’s sexuality has been historically described in metaphors of speechlessness, space, or vision; as an empty space which is at once ever-visible (exposed) and invisible. In this “void” black women’s bodies are always

¹¹Janell Hobson in her book *Venus in the Dark. Blackness and Beauty in Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2005) revisits Sara Baartman’s memory and the legacy of the Venus Hottentot or Black Venus in the African Diaspora.

colonized by the hegemonic discourse on race and sex. To this repressive force black women have reacted with silence, secrecy, and a partially self-chosen invisibility (Hammonds 171). As social and cultural agents, writers such as Straight are contesting the legacies of symbolic power in order to define the terrain of black women's sexuality.

Whether sexual exploitation takes the form of consent, coercion, rape or "seduction," New World slavery afforded slave owners unparalleled access to black women's bodies. Exploiting the sexual and physical labors of black female slaves, slave masters and arbitrary white men found ways to force themselves literally and figuratively on the bodies of black and "yellow" women making a world out of their own desires, blurring the boundaries between exploitation and volition. To sustain their power and free it from guilt, slave masters established a set rhetoric that delineated the purpose and position of slave women's unfree bodies. The interconnectedness between sexual exploitation and economic gain, together with the extra surge of power provoked by the wholesale ownership of another, was too tempting for slave masters to resist.

Moinette, the protagonist of *A Million Nightingales* is a young mulatto slave. She is black and white, child and woman, slave always: paradoxically absent and ever present. Slavery's sexual mythology, the lingering shadow of desire and availability, is inscribed on mix-raced women's bodies—on Moinette's body. The literary representation of the mix-bred mulatta illustrates the denial to speak about historical linkages and the violence of the past. Straight's strong female characters, either blue-black or yellow gals, react against the silence and the lack of subjectivity black women have been relegated to both in society or within discourse in what Ryan calls "the paradigm of resistance" (Ryan 16). Straight's characters might be flawed precisely for

their endurance, their focus, their always knowing how to do the right things within the limited choices their complicated lives offer to them.

Moinette is sexually assaulted on several occasions at her master's house, since just like her mother she is a "gift-girl," a light skinned black woman the master has to entertain his guests when they arrive to do business with him at the plantation. The setting of the novel is early 19th century French Louisiana (1815) and revises the stereotype of the tragic mulatta, a rather controversial figure for its ambivalent position regarding issues of identity and sexuality. Moinette learns to cope with her liminal position in between races immersed in the contradictory and complicated settings of antebellum Louisiana, where French, English, Irish, Swiss, German, Canadian, Spaniards and Americans lived, among them where officials, soldiers, farmers, and trappers as well as Acadian refugees.

In fact, the mulatto has constituted a threat to North American racial hierarchy, property, and authority for more than 300 years. His/her position became "potentially disruptive in the antebellum American novel" proving that "blood relations bound Africans and Europeans," subverting "the idea of a natural boundary between black and white" and exposing the cultural anxiety over race and the anxiety surrounding hybridity.²

As Hortense J. Spillers points out in her article "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe,"³ the ethical code of slavery illegitimated all that should be considered legitimate by the laws of nature; for instance that the mulatto/a child should have both a father and a mother. It is what Spillers calls "another instance of vestibular cultural formation where "kinship" loses meaning, since it can be invaded at any

Nancy Bentley, "White Slaves: The Mulatto Hero in Antebellum Fiction," *American Literature* 65, 3 (September 1993): 503-504.

The very title of the article "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" An American Grammar Book, suggests the corrupt ethical code. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe An American Grammar Book" in *Within the Circle: An Anthology*, ed. Angelyn Mitchell (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994).

given and arbitrary moment by the property relation.””⁴ As dictated by slavery, the mulatto offspring was orphaned by the father—who was white, and who usually had a white wife. The black mother and children were left alone to fend for themselves, often becoming subjected to the whims of the master, the scorn of the master’s wife, and sometimes of the slave community.

During the 19th century, as part of the Cult of True Womanhood, motherhood was only revered when protected by marriage. Therefore, black women in America must have felt at odds with this unrealistic understanding of family relations and female sexuality, for slaves were rarely allowed to marry and most mulattoes resulted from the violation of slave women. As Barbara Christian points out, in Africa, the feminine task of rearing and nurturing children was understood as sacred, as were male and female sexual roles within the community.⁵ Great would have been their astonishment when they experienced the distortion of their life patterns by the planter’s ideology. Regarding black women’s economic value as breeders, and depriving them of the right of caring for their own babies forcing them to work in the fields and in the “big house,” the system of slavery tied the role of black women to the economic exploitation inherent in the institution of slavery.

Some ethical codes were codified legally in what were known as *The Black Codes* or the *Code Noir* during slavery.⁶ In 1865, southerners created these codes as a way to control and inhibit the freedom of ex-slaves almost in every aspect of life. Other corrupt ethical codes were simply part of the everyday ways of behaving that everyone understood for they were taught by word and action

Hortense S. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe An American Grammar Book” in *Within the Circle: An Anthology*, ed. Angelyn Mitchell (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 469.

⁵ Barbara Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers*. (New York: Pergamon, 1985), 10.

⁶ Floyd W. Hayes, III ed. *A Turbulent Voyage. Readings in African American Studies* (San Diego: Collegiate Press, 1992), 584-585.

from birth. these corrupt ethical codes sprang from the justifications of slavery and were based on declaring the person of African descent as inferior, and at times, as inhuman. They were also invoked to establish a distance between the acknowledged humanity of the whites and the denied humanity of blacks.⁷

The mulatto character, male or female, by very existence, stood in violation of that distance which was necessary to justify “morally” slavery, and later racial oppression and discrimination. The mulatta character quickly gained a particular currency because she embodied all the taboos that maintained the corrupt ethical codes: she presented physical features attributed to the white race—light skin color, straight hair, and in many cases, blue eyes. Thus, she became a liminal figure. For those proslavery, she presented the borderline that if crossed would lead to utter domination of evil that was inherent in her and that was based on the confluence of race and sex (not gender, but sex—the fear of miscegenation). For those in the antislavery camp, she represented either the human, but taboo character that should be freed but separate from whites, or she represented the hope of the future—racial amalgamation or racial mixing, which some saw as the antidote to racism. In fact, the word miscegenation itself is a word that connotes a violation of the ethical code. Its etymology is from the Greek *miscere* (“to mix”) and *genus* (“race”).⁸ Those in favor of racial mixing in the 19th century used the word amalgamation, for instance, Frederick Douglass.⁹ Thus, because she was different and alluring in looks, the mulatta’s very existence simultaneously signaled violation of the corrupt ethical code and suggested its illegitimacy: her humanity was emphasized because of her similarity to whites.

⁷ Winthrop Jordan in *White over Black American Attitudes Toward the Negro 1550- 1812* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1971), presents an enlightening study of the beginnings of images of the Negro in the early American mind and culture.

⁸ Encyclopedia of American Studies. Vol. 3. George T. Kurian et al. ed. (New York: Grolier, 2001), 135

⁹ Frederick Douglass in “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July? An Address Delivered in Rochester, New York, on 5 July 1852. <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=162> Retrieved 14 July 2011.

According to Teresa Zackodnik, the mulatta becomes a liminal figure “who transgresses racial distinctions and racialized notions of womanhood in order to challenge dominant cultural understandings of such identity categories,” thus becoming a “highly ambivalent figure who enables a double-voiced address.”¹⁰

the significance of the figure of the mulatta is of extreme importance because the features of sex and race converge in the figure of the mulatta as shaped by class, gender, ethnicity, etc. The mulatta symbolizes graphically one who straddles two worlds. This fact, that the mulatta belongs to both the black and the white race, represents the reality of a painful situation of ambivalence. The mulatta is caught between two worlds: the upper privileged white world of patriarchy and power, and the lower world of slavery, the world of the plantation cabins and their forefathers and mothers. The mulatta as writer and her fictional heroines subvert the narrative genres in vogue during the 19th century as well as the ethical parameters that up to the point of writing their autobiographies and narratives governed their own life and American society at large. The ethics of the mulatta as writer means at the same time an act of subversion and of resistance. As Teresa Zackodnik points out, the mulatta figure stands at the center of African American women’s rhetorical and textual strategies, becoming a “figure of hybridity who reaches across, challenges, and confounds the color line.”¹¹

For Toni Morrison the Africanist¹² presence is of essential importance for the understanding of the Anglo-American literary tradition. The figure of the mulatto/a in white as well as black fiction stands at the core of convergence between the image of white and black historically in US American culture, and between the African American literary tradition and the Anglo-American literary

¹⁰ Teresa Zackodnik, *The Mulatta and the Politics of Race* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), xii.

¹¹ Teresa Zackodnik, *The Mulatta and the Politics of Race* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), xii.

¹² Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Random, 1992).

tradition. The mulatta, being both black and white simultaneously, can be interrogated as a bridge for literary and cultural communication. In black fiction, her struggle revolves around maintaining her black identity and accepting her white heritage as well, thus, her embodiment of double consciousness which represents “a testing of boundaries and a quest for knowledge.”¹³

The present study of the mulatta problematizes the idea that American or African American literature could be exclusively white or black in its subject matter, or in the historical experience, for as Barbara Johnson has argued, “cultures are not containable within boundaries” because the terms black and white imply “complex and interlocking cultural and linguistic phenomena.”¹⁴ Thus, the mulatta character deflects from a conception of race that emphasizes the “either/or” approach. She represents in literature and in life itself someone who is “neither black nor white, yet both.”¹⁵

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¹³ Werner Sollors, “‘Never Was Born’: The Mulatto, an American Tragedy? In *Massachussets Review* (1986): 27, 294-316, 305.

¹⁴ Barbara Johnson, “Canon Formation and the Afro-American Tradition,” in *Afro-American Literary Studies in the 1990s*, ed. Houston A. Baker, Jr., and Patricia Redmond. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 42.

¹⁵ Werner Sollors, *Neither Black nor White, yet Both Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

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