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Three Books, Three Stereotypes

Mothers and the Ghosts of Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire in Contemporary African American Literature

Christine Eck

“Sometimes I almost forget I’m a Negro,” says Irma Jefferson in *Negroland* (Jefferson 41). This statement makes it sound as if Irma was ashamed of her race. However, her daughter Margo Jefferson later avers that in saying this Irma was actually carving out a space for herself that was free from the ever-present consciousness and stereotypes of race. Irma, along with other mothers in contemporary African American literature—like Esch from Jesmyn Ward’s *Salvage the Bones* and Kathryn from Tracy K. Smith’s *Ordinary Light*—carves out a space for herself by declaring independence from old, deep-seated stereotypes of black women.

Why should it be necessary for these mothers to make a space for themselves in the first place? Since slave times, stereotypes of black women have been used to dehumanize black women and corner them into narrow roles. Three stereotypes in particular are lasting and pervasive. First, of Aunt Jemima fame, enters the character of Mammy. Mammy is a stereotype that portrays a good, faithful, cheerful household slave. She is a surrogate mother to the white children of the house. According to Jessie Parkhurst,

she is devoted to her white family, even more than to her true, black family (361). This stereotype was used to justify slavery by suggesting that slaves consented to and enjoyed their enslavement. Besides Aunt Jemima, most people are familiar with Mammy through the character of that title in the film version of *Gone with the Wind*. Maria St. John avers that this film is a twentieth-century example of white America's fascination with Mammy (127). Hattie McDaniel received an Oscar for playing the character, though according to Frost many black Americans objected to her participating in the perpetuation of the stereotype (47). In stark contrast to the Mammy figure is the Jezebel. Rupe Simms characterizes the Jezebel figure as a promiscuous, sexually voracious black woman. This stereotype was used beginning in slave times to justify the rape of black women—an old version of “she was asking for it” (Simms 882–3). These two stereotypes, Mammy and Jezebel, allow oppressors to justify their use of black women as slaves, servants, and prostitutes. The third is a caricature that seeks to place blame on black women. Patricia Bell-Scott defines this caricature, a Sapphire, as a black woman who is masculine, angry, and domineering, especially to her husband. This stereotype has been used to explain degradation of black families (85).

These three stereotypes have been treated extensively in the social sciences, with discussion of the Mammy going back at least as far as Parkhurst's essay in 1938. However, since these stereotypes have been around for so long, they are sometimes seen as historical stereotypes that have been replaced in modern representations by new stereotypes, such as the angry black woman and the welfare queen. It is a mistake to discount the role of these older stereotypes, though, because they continue to haunt expectations of what black women are or should be, albeit less directly than they did in the past. Because of their continued relevance, in this paper I will consider the treatment of these stereotypes in three works of modern African American literature: *Negroland* by Margo Jefferson, *Salvage the Bones* by Jezyrn Ward, and *Ordinary Light* by Tracy K. Smith. These works engage lingering stereotypes—these ghosts of expectations—and seek to dispel them either by debunking them or by revising and reclaiming them. The mothers in the above works construct their concept of black motherhood by making their conduct and thoughts antithetical to the stereotypes of Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire, even when they may outwardly appear to fit the stereotypes. Two of the works in question are memoirs; one (*Salvage the Bones*) is a novel. They provide a case study for how contemporary

authors are grappling with stereotypes of black women and mothers. The two memoirs focus on mothers who purposefully refute stereotypes while simultaneously transcending them, whereas the novel directly engages with a stereotype in order to nuance it. This suggests that when recounting true events, black writers may feel the need to show off the best in black mothers, while fiction gives the liberty to reclaim, come to terms with, and complicate negative images and stereotypes.

Resisting Mammy

It could be supposed that black mothers, such as those being discussed in this paper, would be the most likely candidates for being Mammyesque, but the mothers in these works bear little, if any, resemblance to her. They are mothers without being Mammies. After all, a Mammy is not quite a mother. According to Maria St. John,

Mammy both is not and is the black mother of the white child she tends. That is, she is taken for the mother at the level of fantasy (where racial barriers do not hold sway) at the same time she assumes a role distinct from that of mother at the level of cultural representation (where race is regulated and reproduced). (129)

That is to say, a Mammy can never be a mother because her “children” have, or at least will grow up to have, authority over her because they are white and she is black. Though Parkhurst avers that “‘the mammy disciplined the children’ and maintained her attitude of authority toward them even after they were grown,” we cannot assume that she holds the full disciplinary and psychological power that a mother holds over her children (363). There are always limits on her influence due to her subordinate status. As Rupe Simms puts it, “Although they [the master and mistress] indulge her becoming a bit fussy at times and intruding into household affairs, she never forgets ‘her place’” (882). She may act as the mother, and the white family may feel affection for her, but she is ultimately subordinate. Certainly an infant, inasmuch as it understands abstract concepts, will consider the Mammy that suckles it as its mother, but there will always come a time when the child realizes the difference in social status between itself and its Mammy (Parkhurst 361). Additionally, the Mammy is primarily seen as caring for white children, selflessly loving the family she is subservient to while of necessity neglecting her own family. Her “selflessness” towards those not

closely related to her is seen as a virtue. However, the mothers in these texts demonstrate that their idea of virtue is caring for their own first, not clamoring for white adulation at the expense of their own children.

Irma Jefferson from *Negroland* refuses the Mammyish tendency to prefer her white “children” over her own children by refusing to nurture white children. When two white neighbor children who were encouraged by their parents “to have as little as possible to do with” Irma’s daughters nevertheless decide to make use of the Jeffersons’ swing set while the daughters are napping, Irma says, “Margo and Denise are taking their naps. They won’t be down to play, so you can go home” (85). She sends them away three times over the course of three weeks. Her words imply that had the children been playing with Margo and Denise, her response would have been different. As stated elsewhere, the two had plenty of white friends at school. However, when Irma detects that white children would lay claim on anything that she has, as a mother, given her own children, she promptly refuses them. Parkhurst says that “the ‘Black Mammy’ often nursed her master’s child at one breast and her own at the other” (358). Irma does no such thing, even symbolically, and even with something as seemingly harmless as a swing set. She defies Mammy by reserving all of her mothering (and hers is time-consuming, diligent, intentional mothering) for her own children and not consenting to being appropriated in the slightest by children that are not her own.

In contrast to the Mammy, who is doting and caring, but ultimately powerless over her adult charges, Kathryn from *Ordinary Light* commands both obedience and a reverential awe from Tracy well into Tracy’s adulthood. Kathryn is able to exert her authority because she is a black mother mothering her own black child, instead of a submissive black almost-mother trying to bring up a white child who has power over her due to race. Though Kathryn does not act the dictator, it is clear that the power in the relationship goes only one way. Thus, the book celebrates a mother who does not have to engage in the Mammy power dynamic and is free to bring up her own child by her own authority.

Kathryn’s power over her daughter results in Tracy learning from a young age to respect her mother absolutely. When Tracy is young, she and her mother read a book called *Little Conversations with God* that teaches her “how truly simple it was . . . to do what is right” (Smith 16). In one story, a girl avoids being bitten by a snake because she obeys her father’s

command to stay still. In this context of learning absolute truth and learning to obey God and parents perfectly, Tracy says, "I'd sometimes let my eyes drift across her face, taking her in out of habit, memorizing her, breathing in her smell" (17). In the context of learning obedience, Tracy also learns adoration. She also mentions that she was naturally obedient, saying, "She'd give me instructions once, and I'd do just as she said, never considering the alternative" (41).

Even as a young adult whose unmixed admiration towards her mother has turned to frustration, Tracy understands her mother's authority. When discussing going on a vacation with her boyfriend, Tracy says, "My parents had agreed to let me go," even though they do not approve (Smith 268). Even in her rebellion, Tracy seeks her mother's permission. Whenever she rebels, she is acutely conscious that she is disappointing her mother. She talks of briefly returning to church, partly because "I was certainly tired of telling my mother no each time she asked if I was going to church" (247). When her mother "asks" her to help with a Bible school class, Tracy refers to it as "the favor I'd have no choice but to agree to" (260). These examples demonstrate that even during her most sullen and rebellious period, Tracy recognizes the authority of her mother.

This real authority that Kathryn holds over even an adult Tracy is a far cry from the boastful lip service adult that charges paid to their Mammies. Parkhurst records such lip service: "A Southerner of the upper class delighted in saying that he was taught his manners by his 'Black Mammy'" (363). This boast may have had something to do with his affection for his nurse—as Micki McElya says, "black women . . . surely formed emotional ties to white family members at times"—but it had more to do with his own ego: with being rich enough to have had a mammy, with having good manners, or simply with having something shocking and interesting to say. Thus, Kathryn defies the Mammy stereotype (though she is domestic and loving as Mammy is) by being not only a loving mother but also an authoritative one.

There is little of interest to say about the relationship Esch from *Salvage the Bones* has with Mammy, since she is young, slight, and domestically inexperienced, has no relationship with white people worth considering, and has not yet given birth in the course of the novel; as such, she is not even in the running to be considered a Mammy. She has a more interesting relationship to the next stereotype.

Both Smith and Jefferson portray their mothers as anything but servile Mammies. They are powerful enough to command their own children and to refuse mothering white children. These mothers are purposeful and intelligent about their mothering, in contrast to Mammy, who is seen as dependent and only capable of tending to material needs. Because these books are memoirs, they declare, “This is how black mothers *really* are.” They argue the silliness of entertaining the concept of Mammy, when two honest-to-goodness black mothers have so very little in common with her.

Revising Jezebel

Though the pieces of Jefferson, Ward, and Smith focus on mothers, their mother figures are also women. Thus, these mothers engage with stereotypes of black women in general, not just stereotypes specific to black mothers. The Jezebel is one such stereotype, a stereotype that slanders the sexuality of black women. Jefferson and Smith record Irma and Kathryn as women who belie the Jezebel stereotype by being honorable and sexually conservative. They are both upright women who are married to the fathers of their children. Kathryn is a devout Christian who is moral in every sense of the word. She devotes her life to God. She is extremely sexually conservative and shy, witnessed by the fact that she has to have a manual (which she conceals and covers in newspaper) tell her that “Nice Girls Do” have sex (342). She reflects the example of Alice Sewell and other slaves, who snuck into the woods to worship God. Simms declares of such women, “They defied the stereotypical portrayal of themselves as Jezebels. They were not immoral women burning with sexual desire for any man—black or white. Instead, they were pious Christian women hoping to serve God and the rest of humankind and risking physical punishment to worship their Lord” (894). Kathryn considers Christianity not just an important piece of her own life but also an integral part of raising her children. She uses her own piety as a tool for bringing up well-adjusted, righteous, and successful children. In addition, she resists sexual advances made on her by anyone other than her husband, as demonstrated when an old man in her neighborhood grabs her breast. Not only does she not enjoy the advance, but she determines to use her power and the threatened power of the police to end the problem and ensure her safety. She thus wields a power over her body that slave women

simply did not have. She does not have the heart of a Jezebel, nor will she be mistaken for one by the old men of the neighborhood.

Irma makes herself antithetical to a Jezebel, or whore, by always acting as a lady. Jefferson writes that when the Jeffersons are forced to stay in a slovenly hotel room, she attempts to wash the scummy bathtub with hotel soap and cloth. She gives elaborate parties and has a love affair with fine clothes. But most of all, she behaves with ceaseless decorum and teaches her children to do the same. In fact, a main purpose of the entire book seems to be to reveal to the world the existence of upper-class blacks who live for accomplishment and appearance. Jefferson uses her mother as a case in point to describe the society that she lives in. Irma's status as a lady disrupts the Jezebel stereotype. However, several times throughout the memoir, Jefferson reflects that the inhabitants of Negroland try too hard to disrupt stereotypes about them. She reflects, "If we placed too high a value on the looks, manners, and morals called the birthright of the Anglo-Saxon . . . White people wanted to be white just as much as we did" (51). They are accused of wanting to be "White White White White WHITE," and Jefferson implies that this accusation is grounded. This book, in exposing a desire to overcompensate for "perceived deficiencies," embodies the difficulty of using nonfiction to confront stereotypes—that is, being tempted to overdo it in order to save face (52). After reading these books, many black mothers might actually be discouraged if they need to work outside the home or if they conceived out of wedlock. Though Irma and Kathryn are worthy role models, they actually do little to free black mothers from feeling that they must be twice as good as white mothers.

Esch from Ward's *Salvage the Bones* complicates the Jezebel stereotype rather than denying it outright. She loses her virginity when she is twelve, has sex with at least six boys, and is pregnant by the age of fifteen. From all outward appearances, Esch is a Jezebel. Until she starts having sex with Manny, she is always sexually available to any boy that approaches her. She even says that only two things come easily to her: swimming and sex. However, Ward allows us to have sympathy for Esch, someone we might otherwise judge and blame, by giving us access to her thoughts. Through her thoughts, we see that the nature of Esch's sexuality is passive and emotional, rather than aggressive and physical, as a Jezebel's would be. She says:

[Manny wanted the] girly heart that, before Manny, I'd let boys have because they wanted it, and not because I wanted to give it. I'd let boys have

it because for a moment, I was Psyche or Eurydice or Daphne. I was beloved. But with Manny, it was different; he was so beautiful, and still he chose me, again and again. He wanted my girl heart; I gave him both of them. (16)

This quote deserves significant analysis. The key phrase “because they wanted it, and not because I wanted to give it” shows the reader that when Esch lost her virginity to Marquise, her brother’s friend, it was because it was “easier” to allow him to touch her breast, to see her genitals, and to keep going than to say no and hear him ask “why not?” (23). Esch is extremely passive and either feels afraid of displeasing anyone or has never been taught that there is any value in refusing. To say that Esch wants sex would be a stretch—she merely passively accepts it. This distinguishes her from a Jezebel. Ward shows that even though Esch consents to have sex with multiple men, she does not have a voracious sexual appetite. Instead, Ward makes sure that readers cannot dismiss Esch as a Jezebel by characterizing her as sexually passive.

In addition, the “girly heart” that the boys want from Esch is not her heart, but her genitals. This is clarified when Esch says that she gave Manny *both* of her hearts. The boys are not after her heart, and she is not in love with them. If Esch has any motivation to have sex other than for apathy or fear of confrontation, it is to momentarily feel cherished. However, she seeks more than a generic closeness with Manny. “He wanted my girl heart; I gave him both of them,” she says. That is to say, she gives him both the only heart he seeks—her genitals—and her other, more traditionally metaphorical heart—her love. She even stops being sexually available to other boys once she falls in love with Manny, saying, “They ask, and I walk away because it feels like I’m walking toward Manny” (57). It becomes even clearer that Esch has little interest in the physical satisfaction of sex as she voluntarily gives it up once she believes her emotional needs are being met by Manny.

Esch’s desire for sex is merely a misplaced desire to be loved and paid attention to individually, attention she has lacked since her mother died. She has been taught by society, possibly through the Jezebel stereotype itself, that she is valueless. When she threatens to tell Randall that Manny is her baby’s father, Manny says, “You think they don’t know you a slut?” (204). Esch is labeled for her sexual activity, and having started to have sex, there is no point in stopping; she already carries a stigma that predicts that no good will come of her. Forgotten in a family of boys, Esch has not been taught to say no,

nor has she been cherished so as to feel valuable enough to say no. The text suggests that this would have been different had her mother survived. Esch imagines her mother's eyes saying, "Don't do it. Don't become the woman in this bed, Esch" (222). Had her mother lived, she might have taught Esch how to avoid becoming that woman. Esch falls victim to the continued prevalence of the Jezebel stereotype because of what her family has *not* taught her and because of what society *has* taught her. Once she believes that she is "a slut," she sees no value in trying to avoid being one. Esch ignorantly becomes the woman that those around her expect her to become.

Ward uses Esch to combat the Jezebel stereotype, though initially she seems to be a victim of it. After reading Esch's thoughts throughout the book and coming to love her, readers are shocked to hear Manny call her a slut. That is not the character they have come to know and love. However, it could be disturbing for many readers to discover that without the help of the novel, they too may have dismissed someone in her situation as a slut. Ward uses this disconnect in the readers' minds to question the validity of the Jezebel stereotype, a one-dimensional portrayal of a woman that concerns only her sexuality.

Reclaiming Sapphire

Just as the Jezebel stereotype slanders the sexuality of black women, so the Sapphire stereotype slanders their temperament and character. The Sapphire, a woman who is domineering and aggressive towards her husband and others, may even be seen as necessarily emerging from the Jezebel. A woman who acts as a Jezebel will eventually have children and is unlikely to have a supportive husband when she does. This situation may turn her into an aggressive, Sapphire-like mother. This relationship between the two stereotypes plays out in all three of the books. For example, since Irma and Kathryn have kept themselves from being Jezebels, they are also under no necessity to become Sapphires by coercing deadbeat husbands or supporting families on their own. Rather, they are supportive to their breadwinning husbands and excel in the domestic sphere instead of trying to compete in their husbands' roles. They use their homemaking status and strong, nuclear families to be excellent mothers. Irma uses her time at home to teach her girls about their black heritage. Kathryn quickly quits her job as a teacher when she thinks Tracy is being harmed by her absence, thus

showing by her actions that she cares more about maintaining her family than dominating her family.

Esch is not a Sapphire, but she would like to be. Her extreme submissiveness comes into play in her relationship with the last stereotype: that of the Sapphire. Sapphire, who gets her name from the character in the *Amos 'n' Andy* series, controls everything in her relationships with men and bullies them until she gets her way (Walley-Jean 70). Esch controls nothing in her relationships, but she fantasizes about being a Sapphire-type figure. Ward speaks of Esch's inability to actively seek out Manny's attention, saying, "This girl waited because she wasn't like the women in the mythology book, the women who kept me turning the pages: the trickster nymphs, the ruthless goddesses, the world-uprooting mothers" (15). Because Esch does not have a mother to teach her, she seeks out substitute examples of motherhood and womanhood, namely China and Medea, who are both Sapphire figures. China is no doting mother. She has to be persuaded by Skeetah to care for her puppies, and eventually she physically fights with and dominates the father of her puppies, just as a Sapphire is rough with her children and domineering in her relationship with their father. Medea, though initially submissive to Jason, eventually lashes out to kill his new wife—and her own children—to get revenge for Jason's infidelity. Medea, like a Sapphire, is not above brutally treating her husband and children.

Throughout *Salvage the Bones*, Esch compares Manny to Jason and herself to Medea and wonders what it would be like to be Medea. This is an odd ideal to strive for, as Medea and Jason's relationship is neglectful, violent, and ultimately a failure. Perhaps Esch understands from the beginning that Manny is using her as Jason uses Medea, and she desires only the courage to stop loving him or strike out at him or do anything but passively wait for him to never love her. Though Esch idealizes Manny and proves herself willing to be used in the hopes that he will eventually fall in love with her, she is certainly not deceived about the nature of their relationship. She acknowledges that Manny never looks at her or talks to her or kisses her; he only has sex with her. Alternatively, it is possible that Edith Hamilton's *Mythology*, where Esch reads the Jason and Medea story, is one of Esch's only sources for love stories; if so, she may accept this warning tale as the norm for love, if not the ideal. Esch has no examples of happy, functional relationships in her life, and perhaps she has none in literature either.

In either case, Esch eventually stops waiting for Manny and takes charge of her life. Throughout the novel, Esch essentially places her pregnancy in Manny's hands, wondering if he will pay attention to her and support her once he finds out he is to be a father. But when she tells Manny that she is pregnant and he rebuffs her, she begins to beat him up. In this scene, she stops hypothesizing what Medea felt like and says "this is Medea" (204). Esch no longer has to say that "she wasn't like the women in the mythology book," because she is acting just as Medea acted when she was jilted (15). She has become like the women in the mythology book. The book ends with her owning her pregnancy in a powerful way, like Medea or China would—or perhaps like Sapphire would. In her case taking responsibility for herself is imperative, and the image of Sapphire actually becomes positive, since Manny will not support her. She says of China, "She will know that I have kept watch, that I have fought. China will bark and call me sister. . . . She will know that I am a mother" (258). She thinks of herself as pregnant many times in the novel, but only at the end does she commit to being, and calling herself, a mother. Because she finally realizes that Manny will not support her, she stops thinking of the pregnancy as a way to have a relationship with him and starts thinking of it as the beginning of her relationship with her child. Because she finally has a relationship (with her unborn child) that she can define herself, she is not passively waiting for society, her family, or Manny to tell her who she is anymore. She knows.

Ward uses Esch to reclaim the Jezebel and Sapphire stereotypes. She shows us why Esch becomes sexually active and shows us her value and humanity. We come to understand and sympathize with someone we might have otherwise overlooked. And given that Esch is going to be a single mother, she shows us the power required of a woman whose child's father refuses to be involved. The Sapphire stereotype describes a woman that drives all her loved ones away through her personal power. Ward revises this: when a woman is neglected and abandoned, she will learn to have personal power, and that will help her children survive. Through her command of fiction, Ward does what neither of the memoir writers attempt. Instead of writing her mother figures to oppose stereotypes, she has her mother figures redefine and reclaim stereotypes for the benefit of black women at large. While Irma and Kathryn solidly refute all three classic stereotypes, Esch's relationship to them is more nuanced. It might initially seem that Esch is the weak link in the chain of impeccable black women, but she actually does more to combat

the ghosts of stereotypes haunting the lives of real black women than the two nonfictional mothers do.

Jefferson and Smith portray their mothers in essentially positive lights. As Jefferson says in her memoir, “And (I was taught) you don’t tell your secrets to strangers—certainly not secrets that expose error, weakness, failure” (6). They do not reveal any weakness in their mothers that would play into the stereotypes. Even when the authors describe their mothers as imperfect, they are imperfect in ways that oppose the stereotypes: Kathryn is *too* righteous (in contrast to Jezebel), rendering her a bit judgmental; Irma is *too* loyal to her race (in contrast to Mammy), rendering her a bit suspicious. The fact that Irma and Kathryn have so little to do with the three stereotypes (at least the way they are portrayed) makes them ideal candidates for memoirs. They are safe to write about, and they give a good name to black mothers everywhere.

But what about good mothers who have a child out of wedlock or serve as maids to white families? There may be stories of other black mothers that have gone untold because the mothers have some features of the Mammy, or the Jezebel, or the Sapphire. Many potential authors may not trust the world with a story that it may simply use to reduce loved ones into stereotypes. Might you not refrain from writing about your mother because you fear that she would not be valued for all her qualities, but be read as *just* a black single mother? Even though such mothers may enjoy some presence in a memoir, many may refrain from writing memoirs to protect their mothers from those who would see them simplistically. Thus, examples of real black women will not be able to fully eradicate stereotypes, because they will either confirm some aspect of the stereotype or they will try too hard not to, thus leaving the stereotype looming in the background as something that a black woman must never be. This unhelpfully creates anti-stereotypes that are just as constricting as the stereotypes themselves.

Novels like *Salvage the Bones* are important in eradicating stereotypes because working with fictional characters removes the fear of judgment. No one is afraid of throwing their own mother (or anyone else) under the bus when writing a novel. In addition, there is no danger of giving a “real” example of a stereotype to unsympathetic readers to confirm their biases. Though there may still be some fear of revealing a weakness some African Americans have, at least the fear is less personal. The character of Esch is (somewhat ironically) a powerful tool in eradicating the Jezebel stereotype. Instead of denying outright that any black women may seem like Jezebels,

Ward says, in essence, “given that sexually active, pregnant, teenaged, black girls exist, how can I help people understand them as three dimensional?” While Irma and Kathryn *debunk* stereotypes by proving that there are black women who do not fit them, Esch goes much further in *eradicating* a stereotype by outwardly fulfilling it but still being a lovable, complicated human. As a fictional character that people cannot blame, Esch blazes a trail for the acceptance of imperfect black women to be seen as more than caricatures. In a larger context, fiction may be one avenue towards correcting the need for black people to be twice as good as white people in order to be seen as equal. Fictional portrayals that engage with and carefully revise stereotypes may lead to greater acceptance of real black people who share some of their outward characteristics than nonfictional but idealized portrayals ever can.

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