Like One of the Family

Like One of the Family:

Domestic Workers, Race, and In/Visibility in The Help

Edited by

Fiona Mills

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Looking forward, Reflecting back.

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PREFACE

"MASK-WEARING AND TIGHTROPE-WALKING"

TRUDIER HARRIS
UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA

Survival. That has always been the objective. African-American women who went into white neighborhoods to seek domestic employment from the years after the Civil War until contemporary times have had to contend with challenges to their very existence, whether those challenges manifested themselves as physical violence or the more pervasive psychological trauma that attended an unrelenting lack of comfort and safety. Such women had to go from the familiar territory of their black neighborhoods to alien territory every time they set out for work. That alien territory might have been marked from the time they entered the car of the white man or woman who cruised into their black neighborhoods to pick them up for work, or it might have been demarcated by the bus trips that ended a few blocks from the big, white houses to which these women trekked to work. Alien territory meant that these women had no relatives or advocates upon whom they could rely. The space of the white house that a black domestic entered thus necessitated a transformation on her part. She could no longer be the carefree, easy-talking personality for which she may have been known among her family and neighbors. She could no longer be boisterous if such were a part of her personality. She could no longer smile unconsciously or move as freely as she was wont to do at home. Entering the alien territory of the white house meant that the black woman had to become a performer. She gave up her familiar self to become something else entirely. And what was that something else? More often than not, it was a projection that jumped from the imaginations of the whites for whom she worked and landed wholeheartedly in her psyche. For the duration of her time in white space, the black domestic worker became a stranger to herself.

No matter the claims of being "like one of the family," any black historical domestic worker knew that that was not the case. Alice Childress's fictional day worker, Mildred Johnson, makes this clear to one of her employers in *Like One of the Family: Conversations from a Domestic's Life* (1956) after the woman insists that the family "loves" Mildred and that Mildred is indeed "like one of the family." Mildred's sense of humor and outspokenness are foreign traits to historical domestic workers:

> In the first place, you do not *love* me; you may be fond of me, but that is all . . . In the second place, I am *not* just like one of the family at all! The family eats in the dining room and I eat in the kitchen. Your mama borrows your lace tablecloth for her company and your son entertains his friends in your parlor, your daughter takes her afternoon nap on the living room couch and the puppy sleeps on your satin spread . . . and whenever your husband gets tired of something you are talkin' about he says, 'Oh, for Pete's sake, forget it. . . .' So you can see I am not *just* like one of the family.
>
> Now for another thing. I do not *just* adore your little Carol. I think she is a likable child, but she is also fresh and sassy. I know you call it 'uninhibited' and that is the way you want your child to be, but *luckily* my mother taught me some inhibitions or else I would smack little Carol once in a while when she's talkin' to you like you're a dog, but as it is I just laugh it off the way you do because she is *your* child and I am *not* like one of the family.[1]

Even if a domestic worker attempted to take on the white family's fantasy of being "like one of the family," she knew that facts made her reality clear. After all, one does not usually hire family members to cook, clean, wash, iron, take care of the children, and do all the crappy, dirty jobs that one does not want to do. The very fact of employment presumes—and dictates—a hierarchical relationship in which the haves and the have-nots are distinguished clearly. In black/white, maid/mistress relationships, economics take precedence over family relationships, and race dominates everything. It would have been a sorely deluded maid, such as Pauline Breedlove, whom Toni Morrison portrays in *The Bluest Eye* (1970), who could remotely have believed that she was indeed valued as much as a member of the white family for whom she worked. Yet, it was incumbent upon the maid to be responsive to and flattered by white assertions that she was "like one of the family."

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[1]. Alice Childress, *Like One of the Family: Conversations from a Domestic's Life* (1956; rpt. Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), p. 2. Emphasis in original.

From entry into white space to being claimed as titularly related, the black domestic had to be acquainted intimately with the dynamics of performance. She had to smile when she really wanted to slap someone. She had to pretend to be deaf when dinner discussions among her white employers focused critically upon her own people or even indeed upon her own family. Similar pretend deafness might have been necessary when the white husband or teenage son of the household made unpleasant sexual innuendoes. She had to pretend to be deaf and blind to rudeness and general discourtesies. She had to pretend that she had no mastery of the English language, at least not the Standard English that her employers used. She had to pretend to appreciate the "service pans" of food that often substituted for a portion of monetary wages. She had to pretend to appreciate the castoff clothing that so many white women believed their black servants would love receiving. She had to pretend to love eating, alone, in the kitchen and using the glass, plate, cup, and eating utensils that had been dubbed "for nigger use only." She had to pretend to love her young white charges (and perhaps often she did) even when they were the antithesis of everything she taught and advocated in behavior for her own children. She had, in other words, to grin and bear everything without giving any hint that she had any objections to what went on around her. The dynamics of that alien space dictated a total lack of physical and psychological comfort for the black domestic worker. Her situation might be comparable to going to war every day and returning home in the evening. It is that knowledge of returning home that enables the constant alertness that she must exert for every second of every minute of every hour of every day that she is in that alien territory.

It is no wonder that the majority of such women were devout Christians or that one of the songs that moved them most was "Rest for the Weary," for surely the only time they could envision complete rest was the time when they would no longer be at the beck and call of uncaring and exploitative white employers. It was frequently their beliefs that enabled them to endure misbehaved white children, overwork piled on by insensitive white women, and the forced neglect of their own children. It was only by the grace of God, so many of them believed, that they could keep on keeping on. It is no wonder that Aibileen declares to aggressively racist Miss Hilly in Kathryn Stockett's *The Help* (2009), "You a godless woman," for only a woman without knowledge of God and His mercy could be so unrelentingly racist. While black women might have worked hard to retain their Christianity in the racist and exploitative circumstances in which they found themselves, there is little evidence that the white women who employed them were equally spiritually driven. After all, the

basis for employing black domestic workers was to get more than one paid for, which is inherently not the most Christian practice. Indeed, mill workers in North Carolina who made a mere eight dollars a week during the third and fourth decades of the twentieth century were able to hire black domestic workers. That was possible only because such employers had no Christian consciences guiding their hiring practices.

Into these environments, then, black women came because they had to, and they acquiesced to their exploitation because they similarly had little choice. Domestic work was the primary employment option for lower-class black women throughout their hiring history in America. Nonetheless, these environments, more often than not, were devoid of safety and devoid of trust. Anything that happened during the course of any day a black woman worked in a white home was almost invariably her fault. If money came up missing, the black woman had taken it. If a white child fell, it was because the black woman was not attentive enough. If the biscuits were burned or the chicken slightly undercooked, then, in the absence of slavery-sanctioned corporeal punishment, docked wages—or firing—would be the result. There could be no security in an environment where the employer was always right and the employee was always at fault. Clearly, no concept of equality could govern maid/mistress interactions in the homes of whites just as no concept of equality governed the society in which these women were employed.

Fascinatingly, for all the inequality, tension, and lack of trust, maid/mistress relationships thrived on an intense version of an "intimate strangers" dynamic. While the maid was obviously not "like one of the family," she was nevertheless expected to cook meals for the family, which means that she had control over the ingredients for cooking and anything else that revolved around cooking and serving meals. How whites rationalized having such women cook their food but thought them too dirty to sit down to eat with them or to use their bathrooms is the height of a special kind of irrational absurdity. How whites could trust a black woman they believed to be so unequal to them to perform all the intimate cleaning and feeding rituals connected to their precious offspring is another level of absurdity. Certainly such women did not wear gloves all day every day, so obviously white families were exposed directly to their hands and the shedding of cells from those black bodies. Yet, the extremes to which some whites went, such as Hilly in *The Help*, in trying to maintain separation of black women from their families boggle the mind even in the so-called post-racial twenty-first century.

If black women were so unacceptable, then why allow them to hug up, kiss on, bathe, and play with white children? Was there some level at

which the intimate stranger could indeed be lovable? Perhaps that was the case before white children were taught their social stations. And perhaps some black women held special affection for the white children who dominated their existences more than the children to whom they actually gave birth. Clearly, Aibileen feels something for Mae Mobley and the nearly twenty other white children she has raised in *The Help*. It would be downright inhuman to assert otherwise. The tangled mix of emotions that existed between these intimate strangers, therefore, informs practically all maid/mistress/white child interactions. Even Childress's verbally confident Mildred, who talks back to her employers on several occasions, is touched by some of the children of white women for whom she works. And it is a literary pattern from William Faulkner's Dilsey in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) to Sue Monk Kidd's Lily Owens in *The Secret Life of Bees* (2002) that some white children find more solace, comfort, and space to grow with black women in their lives than with the whites who have given birth to them or who are otherwise biologically related.

Stockett's *The Help* is a twenty-first-century version of that concept. As such, it provides an excellent site on which to examine maid/mistress/white child relationships and a host of other interactions involving black women on the alien territory of the white employer's home. Whether it is the novel or the movie, *The Help* invites exploration of domestic racial dynamics in the Civil Rights Era South, particularly Mississippi, the tightrope-walking that black women hired as domestic workers were forced to undertake, the tension-filled interactions that characterized life for maids and mistresses, the economic exploitation attendant upon inequity in racial hiring, the linguistics of racial interactions, the possibility for love—or at least affection—between maids and the white children for whom they care, the remote possibility for friendships across racial and employment lines, and the hope for agency among black women who have been deprived historically of any agency once they enter the alien territory where their livelihoods and the livelihoods of their families lie. Stockett's novel and this collection make clear that problematic interactions across racial lines remain an ongoing dynamic that informs and shapes what happens to black women when they go to work as maids and caregivers in white women's houses.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

When *The Help* first was published, I was inundated with gentle, and not so gentle, admonishments from well-meaning friends, outside the academy, that I should read this book. I resisted for many years precisely due to many of the concerns and criticisms raised in this manuscript. After much prompting, I finally relented, read the novel, and, subsequently, watched the film. Ever since, I have longed to engage scholars and colleagues in a rich discussion about the complex issues that this work raises for many within and without the African-American community. As such, I am ecstatic that I have finally been able to bring such discussion to a much wider audience through this volume. At the very least, I hope to offer a platform through which readers may engage in timely and very necessary conversations about the enduring legacy of racism in our country.

I am grateful to numerous persons who made this project possible, from family to friends to colleagues who gave of their time and their support, both implicit and explicit. In particular, Proctor Academy, through the efforts of Karl Methven, generously provided funding that enabled me to secure permission to include two essays that were previously published in *Southern Cultures* and *Southern Quarterly* in this volume. I am also especially grateful to dear friends and colleagues who have voiced their formal support for this project, including Thomas Fahy, Ian Finseth, Jessica O'Hara, Catherine Seltzer, and Douglass Taylor. I am especially indebted to my long-time friend, Keith B. Mitchell, for his willingness to scrupulously read through the entire manuscript and provide revision suggestions, unsolicited. I also count Sarah Mazer Zink among my many blessings due to her willingness to cast aside other commitments, at the last minute, to give my manuscript one last, incredibly thorough proof-reading. Lastly, I am ever grateful to my husband, who gave of his time to mind our young children so that I could dedicate the necessary hours to putting together this volume. Finally, my gratitude to my mentor, Trudier Harris, whose ground-breaking 1982 exploration of the experiences of domestic workers as voiced through the literature of relatively obscure writers such as Alice Childress implicitly gave birth to many of the conversations included herein, demonstrating the timeliness of her endeavors and providing proof that there are still many miles to go.

INTRODUCTION

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Centered on the experiences of African-American domestic workers living in Jackson, Mississippi, Kathryn Stockett's sanitized portrayal of life in the Deep South, both in text and on film, where black women were charged with rearing white children while concurrently barred from sharing toilets and common eating areas with their employers, simultaneously enthralled and disturbed readers and viewers alike. Notably, it is not the domestics themselves who articulate their tales of servitude but rather Eugenia Phelan, a white twenty-something Mississippian with whom they hesitantly collaborate, who ultimately "voices" their stories of life during the harrowing early days of the Civil Rights Movement in the Deep South. Essentially, these stories are articulated through the voice of a white woman, a fact that becomes even more complex when one acknowledges that this fictional tale of the inner life of black maids working in Jackson, Mississippi, one of the most notorious states in regards to racial atrocities suffered during the mid-twentieth century, is rendered through the words of a white Southern writer, Kathryn Stockett, albeit someone who grew up with domestic help. While her 2009 novel spent over one hundred weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list and the accompanying film adaptation won numerous prizes during the 2012 awards season,[1] including Best Supporting Actress for Octavia Butler, its sentimental portrait of the lives of African-American domestic workers troubles due to its heavy-handed use of dialect and feel-good message about the admirable interventions of a white protagonist intent on alleviating some suffering while glossing over the vicious attacks on African-Americans during the Civil Rights Era, all the while reinforcing the stereotype of the long-suffering, but, ultimately, forgiving and non-threatening mammy figure.

The desire of (primarily) white readers and filmgoers to embrace this text and film wholeheartedly has occurred against the backdrop of the

[1]. So far, the film has grossed over $216 million dollars worldwide.

tenure of our country's first black president and in the wake of disturbing violence against black bodies, often at the hands of police—most notably against Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, and Freddie Gray, to name just a few, as well as the racially motivated, deadly shooting of nine persons in Charleston's Emanuel African Episcopal Methodist Church during a Bible study session in the summer of 2015.

Concurrently, there has also been increasing attention on the plight of domestic workers, both legal and illegal, culminating in the passing of Domestic Workers Bills of Rights since 2010 in several states, including California, New York, and Massachusetts. These laws ensure fair labor standards for domestic workers, including mandated overtime pay for hours worked beyond forty, a guaranteed "day of rest" on every seventh day, written contracts, as well as provisions for maternity leave. As stated in these laws, domestic workers are incredibly vulnerable due to insecure work conditions and enjoy little to no protection against sexual harassment, discrimination, or unsafe work conditions. In the introductory essay to their book *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers in the New Economy*, Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russell Hochschild investigate the growing phenomenon of the migration of Third World women to the United States, and other affluent western nations, in what they term the "global transfer of the services associated with a wife's traditional role—child care, homemaking, and sex—from poor countries to rich ones" (4). Similar to what we witness of black women neglecting the needs of their own families and children in answering the demands of their white employers and charges in *The Help*, these women literally leave their children thousands of miles behind in their search for a more financially secure life for themselves and their loved ones, often not laying eyes on their children for years at a time. The money that these women earn comes at a huge cost given the precarious nature of their work and the lack of supports and laws in place to ensure fair labor standards for them, leaving them vulnerable to abuse and harassment as well as long hours. Notably, these workers are overwhelmingly female, undocumented, and non-white.[2] This global migration of care work comes as a result of the entrance of First World women into the workforce in significantly large numbers, necessitating the transfer of domestic duties to Third World women willing, in effect, to abandon their families in order to escape pandemic poverty in their home nations. As Ehrenreich and Hochschild

[2] . According to Ehrenreich and Hochschild, "Overall, half of the world's 120 million legal and illegal migrants are now believed to be women . . . Throughout the 1990s women outnumbered men among migrants to the United States, Canada, Sweden, the United Kingdom, Argentina, and Israel" (6-7).

contend, however, this work arrangement is predicated upon inescapable inequality and effectually maintains structures of privilege:

> To an extent then, the globalization of childcare and housework brings the ambitious and independent women of the world together: the career-oriented upper-middle-class woman of an affluent nation and the striving woman from a crumbling Third World or postcommunist economy. Only it does not bring them together in the way that second-wave feminists in affluent countries once liked to imagine—as sisters and allies struggling to achieve common goals. Instead, they come together as mistress and maid, employer and employee, across a great divide of privilege and opportunity. (12)

The growing multitudes of such migrant female workers evidences white women's continuing reliance on the cheap domestic labor of women of color and continues a pattern of exploitation harkening back to the time period in which *The Help* takes place. Knowing of the existence of this laboring force, it is especially interesting that so many white women willingly embraced this text precisely because they could identify with Skeeter, the "good" white woman who works on behalf of the maids to make their stories known to the larger community. Yet, presumably, a large portion of these same enthusiasts currently employ women of color in their homes, although, perhaps, not African-American women. A film like *The Help* then may work to alleviate their guilt over participation in such exploitation by allowing viewers to rationalize that those types of hierarchical relationships no longer exist, situated, as the film is, in the (not so distant) past. In many ways, since the racial conversation in the United States often focuses on black-white dichotomies, the plight of women of color who do not identify as African American largely continues to be unexamined. Just as the true stories of the black domestics remain largely untold in Stockett's text due to their filtration through a white narrator, both in the actual text and in the meta-narrative of the book, the experiences and stories of Third World female domestic workers remain similarly hidden due to their literal invisibility as they toil carefully ensconced behind closed doors.[3]

The popularity of the film also raises the question of what characteristics denote a piece of cinema as either a "black" film or a "white" film. More pointedly, can a white director, such as Tate Taylor,

[3]. "Unlike factory workers, who congregate in large numbers, or taxi drivers, who are visible on the street, nannies and maids are often hidden away, one or two at a time, behind closed doors in private homes" (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 4).

directing a film that (theoretically) includes African Americans at its center, make a "black" film or one that speaks authentically about the experiences of African-American life? Certainly, I am not arguing that Taylor has or ever intended to make a "black" film; his cast was largely white, although two of the three main characters, Aibileen and Minny, were African American. However, the question still remains as to Taylor's, or Stockett's, for that matter, desire and/or ability to render an accurate portrayal of black life. Such concerns about white filmmakers and authors depicting the African-American experience are nothing new and questions have historically plagued white writers and directors who have chosen to do so—most notably writer William Styron and his *Confessions of Nat Turner* as well as director Stephen Spielberg in his film adaptation of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. Concerned African-American critics have continued to raise these suspicions time and again with the release of recent films, including Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained* and Behn Zeitlin's *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, which were both released in 2012, shortly after *The Help*. In regards to white filmmakers who attempt to tell stories about black life, critic and filmmaker André Seewood identifies the complexities inherent in doing so in his critical text *Slave Cinema: The Crisis of the African-American in Film*, in which he claims that there exists a

> certain kind of selfless artistic heroism that honors an individual white filmmaker's sacrifice of immediate commercial interests in the effort to shift narrative focus from whites to African-Americans within a film. As a consequence of this shift of narrative focus and sacrifice of commercial interests, the resultant film elicits a penetrating social criticism that extends beyond the circumstances presented and casts doubt upon the values and prejudices of the spectator, both white and black alike, who observe those circumstances. (159)

As Seewood contends, it is entirely possible that a white filmmaker can do justice to a black story but to do so takes a great risk on the part of said filmmaker, whom he terms "a race traitor,"[4] who must be willing to

[4]. In his article "Race Traitors: White Filmmakers Who Make Black Films," Seewood provides a defining list of characteristics embodied by this particular type of filmmaker: "1) The white filmmaker has had extensive Biographical contact or an extended artistic collaboration with African-Americans before or during the production of the film; 2) The white filmmaker usually makes some kind of great personal, professional and/or financial sacrifice to bring their racially challenging vision to the screen; 3) The film differs greatly in emotional tone, acting style, script and/or formal design from conventional Hollywood representations of

sacrifice financial and commercial success. The key is that the filmmaker must engage in a "shift of narrative focus" from a white perspective to one that encompasses fully and authentically the point of view and experiences of its black characters. As a result, the expectations of viewers, both black and white, are disrupted, producing a much more complex and thought-provoking filmic experience. He continues:

> The resultant film makes white spectators uncomfortable with whether or not they are seeing a stereotype and black spectators are unsure if the characters are 'truly' black folk if the characters don't respond in ways that have been culturally defined as 'black'. Ultimately these films challenge the supremacy of 'whiteness' by challenging the notions of 'blackness.' (233-34)

Such filmmakers are race traitors and engender discomfort in *both* black and white filmgoers accordingly:

> For whites in control of the film industry, the works of race traitor filmmakers are treated as a rarified anomaly that should be seen but by the chosen "elite" few. For African-Americans who lack power and control in the industry the works of race traitor filmmakers often [do] not "feel" true because the characters don't respond in the stereotyped "black" ways that we have chosen to believe we all would do. But as I have stated, "These race traitor filmmakers commit their treason to 'whiteness' because they are loyal to humanity," would that we all had such a loyalty in the face of great ignorance and even greater fears. (9)

As Seewood contends, it is the portrayal of both African Americans and whites in all their multifaceted humanity, rather than stereotypical or ideological expectations, that sets such filmmakers apart. As one can easily see, with his film adaptation of Stockett's novel Taylor certainly fails to meet Seewood's required criteria of a "race traitor" given the film's gnawing sentimentality and unwillingness to surpass stereotypical racial categorizations and expectations; it participates, instead, in many

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African-Americans or even contemporary African-American representations of themselves in film; 4) The film usually has a difficult or unsuccessful distribution by skeptical and prejudiced whites which is intended to keep the film from reaching the wider African-American audience; 5) and finally, but most importantly, these films have universal humanist themes; that is to say, the thematic underpinnings of the film are less race specific and do not attempt to identify, defend or accentuate the cultural and moral differences between African-Americans and whites. Instead, the themes within the film pertain to what is human in all of us beyond our racial, class or cultural differences."

black typical tropes including, most glaringly, the reification of the entrenched mammy figure. Rather than "reveal[ing] to us certain truths about ourselves as a human race that we would much rather sweep under a rug," in Seewood's words, Stockett and Taylor avoid a more realistic depiction of the complex and contrary ways in which black and white lives have been and continue to be interwoven in the South (9).

It is important to note that some black filmmakers themselves also fail to successfully create meaningful stories about the African-American lived experience—most notably, Tyler Perry, who has notoriously gained widespread commercial success with his Medea stories that hinge on over-the-top stereotypical depictions and characterizations of black life. Perry has often come under fire from within the African-American community due to the one-dimensionality of his work and his reliance on "coons and buffoonery."[5] Similarly, in a 2009 television interview with Ed Gordon, famed African-American director Spike Lee takes especial issue with Perry, contending "that for me, the imaging is troubling and it harkens back to *Amos n' Andy*."

In keeping with Lee's criticisms, cultural critic and MSNB contributor Touré offers one of the most scathing critiques of Taylor's film in his blog post "Is *The Help* the Most Loathsome Movie in America?" Touré underscores the degree to which the film lacks realism, in particular regarding the very real violence that punctuated the daily lives of African-Americans living in the Deep South during the Civil Rights Era, contending that:

> The specter of violence surrounds them [the characters], though it all occurs offstage, whether it's the assassination of a black leader or domestic violence visited upon a maid by her husband. The total lack of physical consequences for the maids' courageous act of literary civil disobedience is historically absurd, though it does fit with the sanitized tone of the movie. People who argue that it's a realistic movie are incorrect: the men of Jackson, Miss., would have killed several of these maids. The happy ending we get—Viola Davis' Aibileen walking home unharmed as the screen fades to black—is fraudulent and so surreally absurd as to be Dalí-esque.

Touré continues, echoing Seewood's assertions about the dearth of realistic films that accurately depict the experiences of African Americans as well as the complexities that undergird relationships between blacks and

[5]. Jim Izrael in "Tyler Perry Vs. Spike Lee: A Debate Over Class and 'Coonery'" from NPR's "Tell Me More."

whites, by referencing what he terms "the magical negro role"[6] to which the majority of black actors are relegated:

> They are blacks who arrive in the lives of whites with more knowledge and soul and go on to teach whites about life, thus making white lives better… The magical negro role is offensive because despite his or her wisdom and, often, supernatural power, the black character is subordinate to weakened whites. They are there only to help whites. This relates to screenwriter James McBride's recent assertion that in cinematic terms we're often what he calls "cultural maids." He means we're there to service white characters—not always literally serving them but functioning as a vehicle for them to show or prove their morality and heroism or both. We appear as mere props in white lives.

And service to whites is what Stockett and Taylor's African-American characters do as they toil as domestic workers literally serving their white employers. The depth of this servitude is all too apparent as we witness these black women, in particular Constantine and Aibileen, also aid Skeeter in her pursuit of her dream to escape the rigidity of the South's cult of true womanhood that impedes her desire for self-actualization. Ironically, counter to the historic instances of African Americans escaping to the free North, it is the white protagonist who flees, instead, leaving behind the black women who have literally risked their lives by contributing to Skeeter's book. These women are doomed to a disturbingly uncertain and, most likely, unfulfilling (at best) or dangerous (at worst) existence, condemned as they are to continue laboring in racially fraught and harrowingly violent Jackson, Mississippi. As Touré contends, the glossing over of the violence that marked (and still marks) black life enables white viewers to indulge in "fraudulent" nostalgia for a time when blacks and whites worked together, albeit for the betterment of white lives via the interventions of "magical negroes" such as Aibileen and Minny.

Neither Taylor's film version nor Stockett's novel engages audiences in the hard truths about race and the complexities involved in the forging of interracial friendships and bonds as do much more thought-provoking works like Ellen Douglass's 1988 novel *Can't Quit You, Baby* or Alice Childress's 1956 *Like One of the Family: Conversations from a Domestic's Life*. Childress's collection of fictional vignettes about the

[6]. Touré defines this role as follows: "Magical negroes exist so that the knowledge and spirit that comes from blackness can enlighten or redeem whites who are lost or broken. Think of Will Smith in *The Legend of Bagger Vance*, Michael Clarke Duncan in *The Green Mile*, Anthony Mackie in *The Adjustment Bureau* and Sir Laurence Fishburne's Morpheus in *The Matrix*."

experiences of an African-American woman working as a domestic in 1950s New York City is an especially relevant foil to Stockett's work given the former's realistic portrayal of the hierarchical nature of relationships between white employers and their black "help" as well as its ability to give voice to the black female domestic with authenticity. Rather than depending upon stereotypical, one-dimensional characters, Childress's Mildred is a larger-than-life woman who speaks her mind openly about the ugly truths inherent in the work of a domestic as she shares her daily experiences with her friend, Marge. As Trudier Harris asserts in her introduction to the 1986 edition:

> Debunking myths and demanding change—that is the pattern of interaction throughout *Like One of the Family*. Childress allows Mildred to violate all the requirements for silence and invisibility that were historically characteristic of domestics. Mildred questions authority by confronting white women. (xx)

Childress's Mildred, unlike the maids in *The Help*, speaks out against the myriad inequities she suffers at the hands of white employers, however well-meaning, including supposed half days off and countless subtle attacks on her integrity.[7] Harris continues arguing that "Mildred constantly challenges the use and abuse of black domestics . . . [and] recognizes the need for collective representation to protect domestics from excessive labor" (xxi). Unlike the nostalgic presentation by Stockett, Childress explores and explodes the myth of the contented mammy figure who takes great satisfaction in caring for her white charges. Rather, Childress paints Mildred as the moral center in her stories—one who calls it like she sees it, turning the tables on her insipid employers who believe African Americans to be inherently distrustful and, instead, reveals a distinct lack of moral integrity in whites: "Mildred represents conscience and concern, her employers insensitivity and condescension" (xxiii). Childress thus breaks free from stereotypes to present an intricate portrait of African-American life with which her black readers can readily identify and that challenges white readers' assumptions about African-American females, in general, and domestics, in particular. In comparison, Taylor's film and Stockett's novel rely on comfortable stereotypes and sanitized plotlines in order to avoid troubling audiences' narrative and filmic expectations. As such, they have both created texts that placate white viewers with the time-worn story of a white heroine who attempts to uplift black folks but, in reality, saves herself.

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[7]. What we would term today "micro-aggressions."

Perhaps especially troubling has been the preponderance of readers and teachers who point students to this text as a definitive narrative of the black experience during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. This choice comes under fire from Jessica Roake in her essay entitled "Not Helpful: Making Kids Read *The Help* is Not the Way to Teach Them about the Civil Rights Struggle." In it Roake cites numerous high schools that include this text in summer reading lists and underscores the problems inherent in doing so: "The idea of introducing students to the history of America's own violent, terror-driven apartheid era through a reading list that is two-thirds books written from the white perspective by white authors is absurd; the idea that *The Help* should be used as some kind of primary text for understanding the black experience in this country is ludicrously offensive." The editors of *From Uncle Tom's Cabin to The Help: Critical Perspectives on White-Authored Narratives of Black Life* concur and build upon Roake's claim in their introduction, "What's at Stake When White Writes Black," in which they contend that "the dominant narrative lens through which Americans are instructed to view race relations has always been a white one" (1). As Roake rightly asserts there are numerous books written by African Americans that reveal the lived struggle of the Civil Rights Movement and all the violence it entailed to which teachers can readily direct students.[8] Underneath this phenomenon lurks the reality that most white folks are tremendously uncomfortable confronting the true realities undergirding America's racial framework and the horrifying violence and systemic oppression involved therein. Turning to a sanitized version such as Stockett's reader-friendly text (both at the surface written level and in its content) allows readers (and viewers) to placate their anxieties about race by reminding themselves that "it wasn't that bad" after all. Texts like Stockett's and Taylor's thus are inherently dangerous if mistakenly viewed as authentic representations of one of America's most racially fraught time periods. This is particularly problematic for students who may be coming to this material/era for the first time. Enabling such readers to view the experiences of African Americans as mediated through the voice of a white character and author perpetuates racial half-truths and stereotypes that are especially disconcerting given the preponderance of violence against black bodies that continues to this very day. Permitting students,

[8]. Roake references the following novels: Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Ann Petry's *The Street*, and Anthony Groom's *Bombingham*. She also points to nonfiction works, including Paul Hendrickson's *Sons of Mississippi*, Ann Moody's *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, as well as James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* and *Go Tell It on the Mountain.*

especially, and readers, generally, to persist in believing that racist behaviors are unique to whites like the character of despicable Hilly Holbrook obfuscates the reality of structural racism embedded in the everyday fabric of the American South as well as the United States, racism that undergirds black-white relations in the present. Devoid of historical context and knowledge of such structures, it is nearly impossible to confront such societal barriers in an effort to dismantle racist practices that persist today, as one cannot see what is not visible.

The issue of visibility/invisibility is central in this text. At its most basic level, the text itself has lacked traditional critical visibility given the dearth of academic books that focus on this specific novel, although the novel and subsequent film received much attention in national newspapers and magazines as well as significant critical debate in a wide variety of online venues. A few notable exceptions include the aforementioned *From Uncle Tom's Cabin to The Help: Critical Perspectives on White-Authored Narratives of Black Life* edited by Clare Oberon Garcia, Vershawn Ashanti Young, and Charise Pimental (2014); *The Help* Special Issue of *Southern Cultures* (Spring 2014); and a special issue of *Jenda: A Journal of Culture and Women Studies* entitled *Issues of Our Time: The Help* (September 2011) that compiled thirty reviews of the film as well as historical materials and contemporary interviews with maids that document actual lived experiences of domestic workers in the United States.

This collection considers why such sterilized versions of America's complex racial history resonate so deeply in our contemporary timeframe. Essay topics range from examinations of the laboring black female body to the impact of domestic work on families, both black and white, to explorations of the connections between rhetoric, writing, and race. Also included are several comparative pieces that draw connections between Stockett's work and that of 1940s cartoonist Jackie Ormes as well as filmic comparisons to *Imitation of Life* (1934 and 1959) and *Black Girl* (1966) by Senegalese filmmaker Ousmane Sembène. Not surprisingly, several of the included essays cite the "Open Statement to the Fans of *The Help*" issued by the Association of Black Women Historians regarding the troubling depiction of black life in the film and novel alike, contending that "*The Help* distorts, ignores, and trivializes the experiences of black domestic workers. We are specifically concerned about the representations of black life and the lack of attention given to sexual harassment and civil rights activism." They also decry the stereotypical depiction of African-American men as abusive and drunkards as well as the misinformed use of black dialect.

Part I focuses on the experiences of child-rearing and child-bearing in the South as experienced by black domestic workers charged with raising white babies in the homes of their white employers and their all too often dubious visibility and/or invisibility. As such, the essays in this section explore domesticity as well as the strictures of traditional gender roles ascribed to women, both white and black. In "Every Child Left Behind: The Many Invisible Children in *The Help*," Kimberly Wallace-Sanders investigates the experiences of children of domestic workers, focusing on their explicit invisibility in Stockett's text. Wallace-Sanders maintains that Stockett falls victim to the "mammy trap" inhabited by many Southern white writers, including Harriet Beecher Stowe and William Faulkner, in which black female characters must forsake their own children for their white charges. Using Aibileen, one of the central black females in the text, as a prime example, Wallace-Sanders demonstrates the unsettling erasure of black children that occurs in the text as Aibileen focuses her love and affection on Mae Mobley, the young white girl she cares for, while barely acknowledging her dead son, Treelore, whose life was carelessly snuffed out at twenty-four in a work accident. Wallace-Sanders contextualizes the tendency of white authors to depict the love and affection between African-American women and their white charges at the expense of their own children within the framework of African-American authors, including Alice Childress and Toni Morrison, and visual artist Joyce Scott, whose work reveals much more poignantly the steep price paid by the black children of domestic workers.

Similar to Wallace-Sanders's assertions, in "Shortchanged by the Care Economy: The Maid's Daughter in Kathryn Stockett's *The Help*" Magdalena Bogacka-Rode also focuses on the dear price paid by domestic workers involved in the care economy as they are forced to choose between their own children and earning a living. Her essay analyzes domestic expectations and relationships between black and white women through her reading of the experiences of Lulabelle, who is sent away due to her mother Constantine's commitment to working for the Phelan family. Bogacka-Rode examines the abandonment of Lulabelle, Constantine's struggle to maintain ties to her daughter while fulfilling the loyalty demanded by her white "family," and Skeeter's ultimate refusal to reveal Constantine's real story of loss. These points are astutely interwoven with the experiences of modern-day domestic workers, in particular, those of international workers.

Kate Caccavaio also explores the tenuous connections between black and white women, namely, Minny Jackson and Celia Foote, as mediated through the theme of shame in "The Invisibility of Shame: Navigating the

Silence and Stigma of Childlessness and Domestic Abuse in *The Help*." Minny, a black woman whose fertility is spectacle, given her pregnant body carrying her sixth child, serves as a foil to the childless Miss Celia, a white woman from the wrong side of the tracks who married into Southern wealth and has suffered numerous miscarriages. While Minny successful births black babies, Celia struggles with the shame of infertility given the maternal expectations ascribed to Southern white women. Meanwhile, Minny suffers domestic abuse at the hands of Leroy, her long-abusing husband. Caccavaio carefully investigates the ways in which the unspoken shame these women experience enables a potential kinship to form between them; however, it is a limited bond as they fail to transcend racial and social boundaries given their inability (or unwillingness) to openly discuss their specific "shames." Ultimately, then, Caccavaio argues that Stockett's novel serves to reinforce traditional conceptions of domesticity and gender.

Essays in Part II explore Stockett's use of language and the impact of her linguistic choices on the characters themselves as well as readers. Sarah Rude Walker deftly dissects Stockett's questionable usage of Black English in "'You is kind, you is smart, you is important': The Invention and Mediation of Black Language in *The Help*." Walker contends that, similar to other white authors, Stockett arbitrarily employs non-Standard English when voicing her black characters in keeping with traditional depictions of mammy and minstrel figures, most famously in the Brer Rabbit stories by Joel Chandler Harris. Such decisions reveal an encoding of linguistic racial hierarchy in which white English becomes "standard" while black language is deemed "non-standard" and something less than. Walker thus locates Stockett's contemporary text within the context of more canonical works, revealing the ways in which language becomes coded to both explicitly and implicitly reinforce racist stereotypes and ideologies. Continuing with the theme of problematizing language in Stockett's text, Emily Phillips examines the act of testifying as complicated by interracial relationships in "Contemporary Consumption of the False Friendship and Tainted Testimony of Kathryn Stockett's *The Help*." In it, Phillips investigates the mediation of the black maids' stories through the white voice of Skeeter and questions whether such persons can ever successfully step outside of their privilege in order to render authentic the experience of the other.

Part III focuses on film analysis as the essays investigate Tate Taylor's 2011 film adaptation of Stockett's novel. In "Segregation as Southern Anomaly: *The Help* and Hollywood's Deflection of American Racism," Megan Hunt identifies the film's feminized space as a construct through

which the harsh realities of white segregation are nullified as the film implicitly maintains the individuality of Southern racial aggression, detaching it from the pervasive violence of the Civil Rights Movement that serves as the film's backdrop. Utilizing astute analysis of the politics behind such terms as "segregation," Hunt reveals the ways in which racist practices and ideologies were upheld in the South via the rationalizing of such actions as customary—actions that the film fails to identify and wrestle with. Moreover, the film, due to its focus on the feminine and domestic spaces, glosses over the contributions of women, both black and white, to the Civil Rights Movement and black activism, in particular, while ignoring the experiences of black men altogether.

Julie Nakama's essay, entitled "Missing Children: The Absent Son and the Tragic Mulatta in the Films *Imitation of Life* and *The Help*," compares the depiction of mammies and mulattoes in Taylor's contemporary film with both the 1934 and 1959 versions of *Imitation of Life*, revealing their differences as well as the ultimate reification of white privilege in both due to the tragic limitations of black lives. Nakama carefully analyzes the blocking, lighting, and camera angles of both versions of *Imitation of Life* to reveal the racial coding embedded in the film's cinematography that implicitly identifies the biracial daughters with the white mothers, thereby effectively erasing the black mothers. Taylor's film version, Nakama argues, seemingly works against such traditional racial alliances, allowing Aibileen, the main black character, to confront her white counterparts and engage in what critic bell hooks terms "the oppositional gaze." However, the maids' children suffer a fate similar to the daughters in *Imitation of Life*, circumscribed as they are by tragedy and loss.

The last essay in this section, Tracey L. Walters's "Finding Voice and Resistance in Kathryn Stockett's *The Help* and Ousmane Sembène's *Black Girl*," draws interesting parallels between Taylor's 2011 film version and Sembène's 1966 film as Walters contends that domestic workers in both films utilize verbal and non-verbal means of communication to assert their humanity in the face of their domineering white employers. Walters examines the efforts of the maids in *The Help* to fight back against the oppressive system of segregation via overt and covert acts ranging from sharing their stories with Skeeter to verbal confrontations to physical performances of aggression. Similarly, the protagonist, Diouana, in *Black Girl* passively resists her relegation to housekeeper upon moving with her employers from Senegal to France. In comparing the two films, Walters concludes that due to its emphasis on the gaining of voice by the black domestics, Taylor's film provides a more hopeful outlook than Sembène's;

the latter ends with Diouana's tragic suicide, which can be read as the ultimate refusal to serve.

Part IV closes out the book with its focus on the politics and experiences of the laboring black body. This section opens with Ayesha Hardison's "In Service to Whom? Reading Race and Work in *The Help* and *Candy*," in which she contrasts the voicing of black female domestics and relationships between black and white women in Stockett's text with that in Jackie Ormes's 1945 comic strip. Popular in African-American newspapers, *Candy* centers on the experiences of a black domestic employed in the home of Mrs. Goldrocks. Unlike Stockett's deployment of sentimentality to shift the focus from the experiences of the black maids whose lives are constrained by Jim Crow segregation and, instead, functions as a vehicle to argue for the liberation of white women from domestic servitude and gendered oppression, Ormes' use of racial irony and black humor contests white female superiority, especially in the domestic sphere. Giving voice to its black protagonist, *Candy* deconstructs the sanitized racial relationships between white employers and their black employees that *The Help* reifies.

Continuing with the investigation of the delimitations that surround black bodies in servitude, in "The Sexless Servant is the Safer Servant: Domesticated Domestics in Stockett's *The Help*" Kemeshia Randle contends that Stockett's desexualization of the black maids in her text continues the tradition of demanding that black women surrender control of their bodies in service to their white employers. Randle explores the re-inscription of the mammy figure as manifested in Stockett's text due to the lack of agency afforded the black characters and also identifies Stockett's reliance on the trope of dangerous black female sexuality in her comparative analysis of the characters of Aibileen and Minny. Ultimately, Randle issues a call for academics to analyze more comprehensively the literary treatment of black female sexuality in order to render black women more fully human, since to ignore this aspect of their lives is akin to the various other silencings of black bodies that abound in our culture.

The last essay in the collection, "Dirty South: *The Help* and the Problem of Black Bodies," by Tikenya Foster-Singletary, investigates the ways in which Stockett's text, which purportedly focuses on the coming together of black and white women in order to construct a liberating story against the backdrop of the Civil Rights Movement, marginalizes black lives and experiences. She contends that black bodies, in fact, rupture the narrative despite its proclamations that blacks and whites are no different. Instead of erasing boundaries between the races, Stockett's narrative objectifies African Americans as the other due to linguistic and bodily