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REVERSING THE TROPE OF WHITE PATERNALISM OR MAKING MAMMIES?: BLACK
DOMESTIC SERVANTS IN THE WORKS OF FAULKNER, CREWS, AND STOCKETT

THESIS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts
in the College of Arts and Sciences
at the University of Kentucky

By

Anna Gatewood

Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Dr. Peter Kalliney, Professor of English

Lexington, Kentucky

2012

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

REVERSING THE TROPE OF WHITE PATERNALISM OR MAKING MAMMIES?: BLACK DOMESTIC SERVANTS IN THE WORKS OF FAULKNER, CREWS AND STOCKETT

William Faulkner in *The Sound and the Fury*, Harry Crews in *A Feast of Snakes*, and Kathryn Stockett in *The Help* each depict African Americans in roles as domestic servants. The differing historical situations of the novels play a large part in the disparity among the depictions. However, each novel clearly holds black domestic laborers in contrast to their white employers. These texts' depictions of black domestic servants and the whites for whom they care are at different points strikingly similar and tellingly disparate. The overlaps and fissures between black domestic servants portrayed as mammy's and uncles and black domestic servants characterized as powerful and morally upright human beings and what those overlaps and fissures demonstrate about the novels and the historical moments of their creations will be the focus of this study.

KEYWORDS: Domestic Servants, Southern Literature, Harry Crews, William Faulkner, Katherine Stockett

Anna R. Gatewood

7/27/12

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I owe much thanks for the completion of this project to my thesis advisor, Dr. Peter Kalliney, whose insight and guidance were a great help throughout the process. It is with immense gratitude that I acknowledge each member of my thesis committee, Dr. Peter Kalliney, Dr. Tad Mutersbaugh, and Dr. Alan Nadel.

In addition, I am indebted to my family and friends for their continued support, especially Jamie.

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Introduction

As I sit down to compose this, the hour of the 2012 Academy Awards approaches. The Academy's 6,000 members have already cast their ballots for the prestigious Best Film award. According to the media, *The Help* and *The Artist* are the frontrunners. However, I am far more interested in a recent poll that asked American filmgoers which movie they believed should win Best Picture. Overwhelmingly, those polled felt *The Help* should receive the honor. Whether or not *The Help* wins, it is clear that many Americans enjoyed and appreciated the film. Well publicized objections to *The Help's* depictions of Mississippi and portrayals of black women's experiences as domestic servants do not seem to have deterred the film's fans. Nkiru Ngzewu, editor of a special edition of *JENdA: A Journal of Culture and African Women's Studies* devoted to analysis of *The Help*, writes, "To many, it was a heartwarming movie that celebrated Skeeter's, and Minny's and Abileen's boldness while providing good entertainment and teachable history" (5). However, as her commentary and the analyses of the scholars she introduces in her editorial make clear, the film and the issues of race, history, and narrative it raises are complex and controversial.

Among the issues the film brings to the foreground are depictions of black domestic servants and their experiences in the homes and towns controlled by their white employers. Hannah Branch Enobong writes, "domestic service . . . largely defined Black women's work for the course of a century" (49). But before domestic service was an occupation in America, and long after it was such in free states, it was one of the many roles played by slaves. On plantations in the rural south and in the homes of the middle and upper classes in urban areas, the house servant was a staple of domestic life. Even within this subcategory of slaves, there were specializations, among which was the mammy. In *Clinging to Mammy*, Micki McElay defines the role: "the grandmotherly mammy, described as a beloved cook and loving caretaker" (xxiv). Those who occupied the role of mammy were generally elderly and trusted house slaves who

could be counted on to instill in the white children she raised the cultural mores that maintained racial stratification. In 1938, Jessie Parkhurst described the attributes of mammies:

self-respecting, independent, loyal, forward, gentle, captious, affectionate, true, strong, just, warm-hearted, compassionate-hearted, fearless, popular, brave, good, pious, quick-witted, capable, thrifty, proud, regal, courageous, superior, skillful, tender, queenly, dignified, neat, quick, tender, competent, possessed with a temper, trustworthy, faithful, patient, tyrannical, sensible, discreet, efficient, careful, harsh, devoted, truthful, neither apish nor servile. (353)

Many of the above descriptors are contradictory, indicating the liminality of the mammy. She both was and was not a member of the family; she was loyal and dutiful but allowed to give her opinions and advice to her masters; she mothered the white children even as she saw her own sold by the family she cared for; she welcomed white guests yet took her meals in the kitchen, eating from separate dishes. The contradiction and complexity characteristic of the mammy continued as the mammy evolved into the maid.

After the Civil War, mammies were no longer legally enslaved, but many were no less bound to their white employers. Enobong writes, "Free Blacks technically had a choice as to whether or not they would remain a servant in a particular household, but abject poverty and few occupational alternatives prohibited any real movement" (52). In some ways, black domestic servants occupied the mammy role just as slaves had. They performed housework and cared for children; worked long hours on grueling tasks, separated from their own families; and they were expected to bear these burdens as cheerful and loyal family servants. In other ways, as black maids and nurses transitioned from chattel slaves to paid laborers, their conditions changed quite drastically. To their benefit, black domestic workers often lived outside the homes of their employers, enabling them to be part of a black community and reducing instances of sexual exploitation. However, in other ways, the change negatively affected the quality of life for domestics. Due to increasing distance, physical and socio-cultural, between the lives of whites and their black domestic servants, familiarity and intimacy no longer necessarily earned black women places of respect in white households.

Into the late twentieth century, white employers' expectations of maids were similar to expectations of antebellum mammies. Trudier Harris explains, "The mistress expects the maid to be a good mammy simply because, she believes, it's in her blood" (20). After recounting the story of one domestic servant working in a southern city in 1912, Micki McElay concludes, "the continuing effects of both racial slavery and popular historical memory shaped twentieth-century domestic work. The demands of this domestic worker's job felt like a reconstitution of enslavement, while her employer's insistence on calling her 'Mammy' was an expression of the white woman's fantasy of having a slave" (194-195). Thus, mammy figures did not cease to exist with the end of slavery. Mammies, in their broadest definition as "beloved cook and loving caretaker", have been the subjects of literature since the antebellum period and, as *The Help* demonstrates, continue to be so today.

Dominant white sentiments toward black slaves and servants in the Civil War, Reconstruction, and Civil Rights Movement eras have been well documented. White narratives about the faithful black mammies or maids that raised them were still a popular genre into the 1940's. These texts, unmistakably nostalgic and unapologetically paternalistic, were transparent attempts to maintain the social order of the time. Far more interesting than such formulaic texts are those that represent counter narratives. William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* represents a significant departure from hegemonic representations of black domestic servants. The character of Dilsey is a portrayal of a black domestic who, though she does fill the role of faithful servant, acts as a powerful foil of the Compson clan. From elevated ethical ground, Dilsey lords over the Compson family in many ways. Though Dilsey and her family are at the Compsons' mercy for food and shelter, the Compsons are far more dependent on Dilsey's family. In many ways, Dilsey and Luster's compassion, strength, and practical knowledge and skills set them above each member of the Compson family.

Written over forty years later, Harry Crews's *A Feast of Snakes* presents an interesting contrast to Dilsey and her family. George, Lummy, and Lottie Mae are all members of an

unnamed black family who has for at least two generations been employed by the Mackeys, a well-known though poor white family. *A Feast of Snakes*, like *The Sound and the Fury*, sets these black domestic servants up as the humane, emotionally and mentally stable, and skilled counterparts to a dysfunctional white family. Additionally, multiple points of view are represented by the text's narrator, allowing readers insight into the thoughts and perceptions of the black characters. The relationships, both working and personal, between the Mackeys and the black family who works for them are certainly reminiscent of those between mammies and their masters in many ways. However, the characters make the text a contrapuntal telling of a common southern story.

As mentioned earlier, *The Help* has been hotly debated by many members of the media and several scholars. The text has been marketed as the empowering tale of three women who "come together for a clandestine project that will put them all at risk . . . Because they are suffocating within the lines that define their town and their times. And sometimes lines are made to be crossed." ("Synopsis"). However the lines that the book claims will be crossed are in many ways heavily policed. The black characters in the text do collaborate with Skeeter, a white college graduate, to undermine the silence surrounding the work relations between black domestics and their white employers. However, in practice, the status quo is carefully maintained by the characters and the text as a whole. Though some of the characters challenge white control in action and word, the text ultimately works to situate the characters in roles that nullify their protests.

The Help differs significantly from *The Sound and the Fury* and *A Feast of Snakes* in that it is set and written in two eras separated temporally by over fifty years: set in the 1960's and published in 2009. There is little scholarship on the historical fiction of the American South and texts' successes and failures as they attempt to capture what Hayden White calls the "truth" and the "reality" of historical moments related to the civil rights movement. In his introduction to an issue of *Rethinking History*, "Historical Fiction, Fictional History, and Historical Reality", White

describes the real as it is depicted in historical fiction: “The real would consist of everything and anything we could imagine about it. The real would consist of everything that can be truthfully said about its actuality plus everything that can be truthfully said about what it could *possibly* be” (147). While White is supportive of historical fiction and its endeavors to bring to surface the reality in addition to the truth of historical moments, he qualifies his endorsement through an example of what he calls “an artistic treatment of a real event”:

Primo Levi’s book [*Survival in Auschwitz*] is true in a fictional sense, in the sense that the *image* of Auschwitz conjured up by Levi’s poetic prose is ‘faithful’ as well as being ‘true’ to the range of feelings induced by the experience of an extraordinary *historical* condition of subjection and humiliation. There is no conflict between the ‘truth-content’ of what Levi has to say about the experience of the Lager and the ‘realism’ of the representation (or, as I would prefer, ‘presentation’). There is no conflict between the referential function of Levi’s discourse and the expressive, affective and poetic functions. The ‘coherence’ of his discourse is not of the order of logical consistency alone, but of the order of imaginative consistency—the ‘tropologic’ of imaginal discourse—as well. (149)

Thus, works of fiction that deal in history are not exempt from being held up to the light of “truth”, which in the context of White’s article and this argument, refers to established historical facts. That they are fiction is neither enough to exclude them from serious study, as White goes on to argue, nor grounds to excuse them from a responsibility to “*truthfully*” depict “the range of feelings induced by the experience of an extraordinary *historical* condition” (147). Critics and readers alike, then, may reasonably expect each of these texts to be true to the historical conditions of the eras in which they are set. However, texts must also display contemporary understandings of the complexities of the historical conditions they depict. For example, we might expect *The Help*, written in 2009, to use contemporary understandings of 1960’s race relations to inform its portrayal of Jackson, Mississippi. This is not to say that characters, plot lines, or any other textual element must espouse an anachronistic paradigm. Rather, texts can be expected to utilize contemporary frameworks and modes of understanding to fully unpack historical moments. In such instances, the characters and scenes may be making one claim—in the context of *A Feast of Snakes* for example, an extremely racist claim—while the text as a

whole works to say something quite different—that the text’s black characters deserve more respect as human beings that do whites.

As the US moves away from slavery temporally, many assume race relations in the United States have steadily improved on all fronts. If this is so, we might expect *The Help* to reflect a fuller understanding of the complexities of race relations and domestic service than do *The Sound and the Fury* or *A Feast of Snakes*. We might also expect *The Help* to stand in more definitive opposition to racial hierarchies and socioeconomic oppression of blacks. This analysis will explore the fallacy of this assumption and dissect each of these texts in an effort to understand the ways in which each recasts its black characters in roles as mammies and uncles and the ways in which *The Sound and the Fury* and *A Feast of Snakes* ultimately attempt to use the black domestic servant as a contrast to whiteness and a counterhegemonic figure. Finally, *The Help* will be examined with attention to the ways in which the text’s black characters’ assertions of power and agency are subverted by their characterizations as faithful mammies.

Dilsey and Luster in *The Sound and the Fury*

Though the action of the novel takes place on only four days, William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* recounts the decay of a family of the Old South. Throughout the text, the dwindling members of the Compson family still live in the shabby main house on their family property: one square mile of land, not a plantation but a mansion surrounded by forests and lawns. Despite, or perhaps because of, the decline of the Compson estate, the Compson family’s efforts are largely focused on the futures of the newest generation of Compsons. Quentin goes to Harvard thanks to the selling off of the last large pieces of the original Compson plot. Caddy gets married to a wealthy, sought-after bachelor. It seems Jason will enter the financial world with the help of Caddy's husband, Shreve. And Benjy is looked after by Dilsey and her family. As 1910 opens in the text, each of the Compson children seems to have found his or her path. However, when the text jumps ahead to 1928, readers learn that each character’s fate has changed. Quentin commits suicide as a result of his obsession with Caddy. Caddy's new husband divorces her after

he realizes the child she gives birth to months after their marriage is not his. Jason is terribly bitter about the loss of his chance to be a banker. And Benjy mourns for Caddy and is later “gelded” and committed to a state facility for the mentally insane. With each of these events, the demise of the Compson family becomes more real. With Quentin dead, Caddy banished, Benjy “gelded”, Miss Quentin¹ vanished, and Jason preferring a kept woman over a bride, it is clear that the Compson line will end with them. It is with this family and reality that Dilsey and her family live.

Dilsey's section, the last of the novel, opens long after the death of Quentin and banishment of Caddy, yet these events loom large. Dilsey and Luster are the primary caretakers of Benjy and Mrs. Compson, both virtually helpless, the former by nature the latter by choice. Meanwhile, Jason and Miss Quentin, Caddy's illegitimate daughter, constantly argue, with their confrontations becoming increasingly intense and physical as the novel draws to a close. Within this context, it is not hard to imagine that Dilsey, Luster, TP, and even the aging and ailing Roskus fill many roles, including peacekeeper, caregiver, mediator, cook, sitter, maid, driver, and protector.

In many ways, the relationship between Dilsey and the Compsons mirrors antebellum relationships between slaves and their owners. The text never reveals how long Dilsey's family has been with the Compsons. However, Dilsey tells Luster when he criticizes them, “you got jes es much Compson devilment in you es any of em”, suggesting that her Family has been with the Compsons for at least two generations² (Faulkner 276). With the exception of Frony, Dilsey's daughter, Dilsey's entire family is or was employed by the Compsons. Paid only in food and lodging, Dilsey, Luster, and TP all work for the Compsons seven days a week without ever receiving any monetary compensation for their work. That Dilsey and her family gain no

¹ I will use “Miss Quentin” to reference Caddy Compson’s daughter to differentiate her from Quentin, Caddy Compson’s brother.

² Luster is the third generation of Dilsey’s family living on the Compson property, Dilsey and Roskus being the first, Frony and TP being the second.

purchasing power and without Frony's work outside the Compson compound would remain at the mercy of the Compsons further characterizes the relationship as more master-slave than employer-employee.³ It should come as no surprise, then, that if we look back to Parkhurst and McElya's definitions of a mammy, that the text casts Dilsey in the role of mammy, the "prime minister" of the Compson home. *The Sound and the Fury*, like *A Feast of Snakes* and *The Help*, works toward seemingly contradictory depictions of domestic servants. At times, Dilsey is depicted as a mammy figure, imagined as an extension of the desires of white employers. At other times, the text grants her superiority to whites, who are morally degenerate and emotionally unstable. As Lee Jenkins writes, "She is at once both the old darky in the kitchen grumbling about the vagaries of the white folks and a disciplined and high-minded moralist" (162). Ultimately, though she is situated within the mammy tradition, Dilsey emerges as the moral standard-bearer and rational actor that keeps the Compson home functioning.

Dilsey is generally depicted in *The Sound and the Fury* as a stoic figure. The reader's first impression of her in the book's final section is of her standing in the doorway of her home, facing the elements unflinchingly, despite her aging body. She bravely intercedes for Quentin and is patient and gentle with the Compsons and with her own family, but shows little in the way of emotion. The exception takes place in the well-known Easter sermon at the close of the novel. In the scene, after hearing a sermon in which the preacher speaks of the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, Dilsey weeps. Then, she says the line for which she is best known: "I've seed de first en de last . . . I seed de beginnin, en now I sees de endin" (185). In the context of the novel, it is clear Dilsey is referring to the first and last of the Compsons. Dilsey realizes she is witnessing, as the Compsons fall one by one, the end of a family and a way of life. That Dilsey's most profound show of emotion is for the gradual demise of the white family she has served is telling. Dilsey has evidently internalized the mammy role, one in which black domestic servants

³ It is impossible to discover the ages of Dilsey and her family members. The last date within the action of the text is in April or 1928. At this point, Dilsey is very elderly; however, it is impossible to know if her bond with the Compsons began with her enslavement by them.

are expected to put the needs of their white charges before their own. Though Roskus has rheumatism, Dilsey has her own physical infirmities, and their family is even poorer than the Compsons, Dilsey's sympathy is for the Compsons; she privileges their misfortunes over her own.

The loyalty and faithfulness characteristic of the mammy figure is evident here. Dilsey clearly cares deeply about the Compsons, despite being ill-used by them. That they were largely the architects of their own demise does not deter her from mourning for them. Dilsey identifies with the Compsons, feeling their unraveling as her own and remaining with the family even after she has no financial incentive to. Despite her realization that the Compsons will soon be no more, Dilsey returns to the Compson home to carry on with her routine. She makes lunch, checks on Caroline Compson, and sees Benjy off on his Sunday ride through town. At the novel's close, order is maintained by Jason when he strikes Luster for turning the wrong way through the town square. Dilsey, too, though is complicit in maintaining the status quo. Parkhurst explains in his description of the "Black Mammy",

as history records, the old bonds held the slaves faithful to their masters and to their masters' families . . . [a] sense of identification with the group who owned her made the 'Black Mammy' loyal to the point of sacrificing her own interests. Changed conditions brought no change in her behavior. (367)

Despite the fact that her own daughter moves hours away, Dilsey remains with the Compsons until Jason forces her to go. The Appendix reveals that after Caroline Compson's death, Jason puts Benjy in a state home and sells off the last piece of the Compson land. It is only at this point that Dilsey retires from their service.

Perhaps the most recognizable characteristic of any mammy is her care for her white charges. In any white-authored account of having been raised by a mammy appears the sentiment of deep love between a mammy and the white children for which she cares. Parkhurst explains, "She has often been referred to as a 'unique type of foster motherhood'" (352). Accounts by white southerners about the positive influences of their mammies upon them abound. However, these

women made large sacrifices and faced, along with their children, the negative effects of raising white families. Phyllis Palmer writes of the domestic servants of Dilsey's era, "Since most domestics were women, this often meant that doing a good job taking care of someone else's home required the worker to . . . compromise care for her family . . ." (66). In the case of Dilsey, caring for the cognitively disabled Benjy, ailing Mrs. Compson, rebellious Miss Quentin, and tyrannical Jason called for all of her efforts and those of Luster, her grandson.

Dilsey's relationship with Luster is shaped in large part by the fact that she must also rely on him as her helpmate. Unlike domestic servants who lived with the families who employed them, Dilsey was able to care for her grandson. However, she also had to call on him to help her care for the Compsons. While she fawns over Benjy and throws herself in front of Jason for Miss Quentin, she assigns chores and deals blows to Luster. There is nothing in the text to make readers question Dilsey's love for Luster; she stands up to Jason for him and patiently redirects him as he wanders away from his chores to imitate a traveling music show. However, Dilsey's role as a domestic servant in the Compson home shapes her relationship with her grandson. One scene in particular demonstrates the difference between her treatment of Luster and her treatment of the Compsons:

"Is you right sho you never broke dat window?"
"Whut I want to break hit fur?"
"Whut you do any of your devilment fur?" Dilsey said. "Watch him now, so he can't burn his hand again twell I git de table set."
". . . Ben watched her, slobbering, making a faint, eager sound."
"All right, honey,' she said. 'Here yo breakfast. Bring his chair, Luster . . . And see kin you keep fum messin up his clothes one time,' she said, handing Luster a spoon". (Faulkner 172)

Parkhurst, in describing the typical mammy, writes, "she has been charged with having far greater affection for them than she had for her own children" (361). Though this sentiment is representative of the white-authored myths surrounding mammies, the above passage demonstrates the real effects of domestic service on black families. In the scene, Dilsey's

attention is split between Luster and Benjy, making manifest one of the struggles central to the mammy role. Dilsey is torn between her own family and the white family for whom she cares. In this passage, Dilsey privileges her role as domestic servant over her role as grandmother, demonstrated in the different ways Dilsey treats Luster and Benjy. While she protects and cares for Benjy, she accuses Luster of breaking a window and badgers him about feeding Benjy neatly. Because she must hold Luster responsible for his chores, she cannot fawn over him as she does the Compson children.

In the Appendix to *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner writes of Luster, "A man, aged 14. Who was not only capable of the complete care and security of an idiot twice his age and three times his size, but could keep him entertained" (215). Both Dilsey and the Compsons hold Luster to standards far higher than what is expected of the Compsons. Luster demonstrates patience, compassion, and independence; traits absent from most members of the Compson family. Even after Jason is grown and Miss Quentin is in her late teens, they are often coddled. Meanwhile, Luster is forced to grow up before his time as he takes on the primary caretaking role of Benjy. It is clear at many points in the text that Dilsey and Luster's roles as domestic servants inform their relationship with one another at least as much as their familial ties, situating them within the myth of the mammy void of personal desire, self-interest, or family. However, both Luster and Dilsey resist many such stereotypes even as they reinforce others.

An extension of the alteration of the relationship between Dilsey and Luster is Luster's frequent teasing and provoking of Benjy. His acting out is a natural outgrowth of his relationship with the Compsons and with Dilsey. Generally at the mercy of the Compsons' desires--whether they come directly from Jason or Caroline or through Dilsey's directives--when Luster is alone with Benjy the power differential suddenly changes. Because of his cognitive impairment, Benjy is at the mercy of Luster. Luster is generally kind and gentle with Benjy, but at times Luster does exercise his power over Benjy.

Luster's occasional mistreatment of Benjy is evidence of both the ill effects of domestic service and the ways in which it allows caretakers moments of power. Benjy receives the attention and affection that Luster may otherwise get from his grandmother, and as a result, Luster resents Benjy, in turn expressing that resentment by mistreating Benjy. Additionally, Benjy represents the labor that Luster must perform for the Compsons. Luster's primary responsibility in the Compson home is making sure Benjy does not get hurt and stays on the Compson land and out of the way. Though this may seem like a simple task, it is not an easy one for an adolescent boy. Luster often suffers the consequences of not watching Benjy closely enough or caring for him carefully enough. Whether spilling food on his shirt, as in the passage above, or allowing him to wail in public, Luster is often punished as a result of his responsibility for Benjy. In Luster, we find the confluence of caretaker and the child that the caretaker must disregard in favor of white charges. We also find, however, the power domestic servants and caretakers have over their charges. That Luster exerts this power over Benjy represents his departure from the myth of the domestic servant as a surrogate mother or selfless caretaker. Luster, in the moments in which he takes out his frustration and resentment on Benjy, demonstrates both his agency and his power over Benjy.

Dilsey feels deeply bound to the Compsons, at times privileging their care over that of herself and her family. Though this is one of the most basic characteristics of the mammy figure, Dilsey departs from the mammy role in significant ways, as does Luster. Even as the text depicts Dilsey and Luster as both complicit in and resistant to the mammy myth, it also privileges their lives over those of the Compsons. The closing words of the Appendix to *The Sound and the Fury* are, "Dilsey: They endured" (215). Here Faulkner suggests that while the white family of the Old South dies out, the black family who cared for them will survive. Instead of relying their white employers to care for them, Dilsey and Luster are completely responsible for the care of the Compsons, reversing the paternalistic trope of black inferiority. Additionally, both directly and

indirectly, they challenge the power of Compson family members. Their working relationships and close proximity to whites give them opportunities to challenge white authority.

Inherent in the mammy figure of the antebellum period is a subversive kind of authority that at times allows the mammy to achieve limited ends but prevents her from exerting any significant power. For example, she has the authority to tell the master he is too harsh on his son but lacks the power to protect her own children from the whipping post or the auction block. Thus, the mammy figure has always had some potential to challenge whites, but in the antebellum era, that potential extended only as far as mammy's aims could appear relegated to matters of the family and home. Jesse Parkhurst argues that mammies had the latitude to scold, boss, and sass their owners. He writes, "what in another slave might have been considered impertinence was thought of as her privilege" (355). However, when speaking of the ways in which "Black Mammies" challenge white masters, his descriptions of such interactions reveal the limitations of the mammy figure's power to affect change. Parkhurst says of the mammy's ability to criticize her masters, "she was not above letting them know it in such a naïve manner that it could not be called insubordination" (363). Of her ability to influence her owners, he writes, "She was a diplomat and knew how to handle delicate situations with such a fine sense of appropriateness that her purpose was usually accomplished" (353). Parkhurst alludes to the reality that if mammies had the latitude to "boss" or persuade, it was only through concealed channels. Their challenges had to come veiled in naiveté and appropriateness and present no real, direct threat to the authority of the master or mistress.

There are many scenes in *The Sound and the Fury* in which Dilsey covertly influences the Compsons, quietly undermining the authority of Caroline or Jason. Dilsey also, however, directly challenges both Caroline and Jason and, more significantly, challenges the perceived power differential between the Compsons and she and her family. Dilsey's argument with Jason in defense of Luster in the final section of the novel proves an apt example of the ways in which Dilsey ultimately poses a significant challenge to Jason's authority. In the scene, Luster

desperately wants to attend a traveling music show for which Jason has tickets. Though Luster is willing to beg and bargain for them, Dilsey protects him from Jason's manipulation.

Dilsey's first remarks to Jason set the tone for the scene: "You come, is you? . . . Whut you been up to dis evenin? You knows how much work I got to do. Whyn't you git here on time?" (Faulkner 253). Instead of Jason questioning where Dilsey has been and how she has spent her time, Dilsey chides Jason for making her wait on him. Though such a criticism might have been within the purview of a mammy figure, it quickly becomes clear that Dilsey does not perceive her role as one of deferent servant.

The scene, in which the tickets are discussed and ultimately burned, begins with Dilsey telling Luster that he is as likely to grow wings and fly as he is to go to the music show (254). Jason, realizing how much Luster wants the tickets, tells him "I wouldn't go to [the show] for ten dollars . . . I came here to burn [the tickets] up. But if you want to buy one for a nickel?" (254-255). After Luster tells him he does not have a nickel, Jason drops one ticket into the stove and then, after more begging and bargaining from Luster, drops in the other. What makes the scene intriguing and relevant to this analysis is Dilsey's reaction to the dialogue between Jason and Luster. Dilsey continuously tells Luster to "hush" and Jason to "let him alone" (254). Dilsey tries to prevent Jason from teasing Luster and Luster from begging for the tickets that Jason would never have given or sold to him. At the end of the exchange, Dilsey tells Luster while Jason looks on, "I'll git you a quarter fum Frony tonight and you kin go tomorrow night" (255). Though Jason burns the tickets, Luster and Dilsey win out: in Dilsey's section, we find out that Luster did attend the traveling show, enjoying it as much as he had hoped.

In the scene outlined above, Jason seeks to exert his control over Luster by offering him the tickets at a price Jason knows he cannot afford. Jason makes clear that he would rather burn the tickets than either use them or give them to Luster and enjoys Luster's attempts to bargain for them. He tells Luster "I need the cash" when Luster offers to maintain Jason's car for a month in exchange for one ticket. Luster, even at fourteen, would have understood that Jason did not need

the nickel he wanted for the tickets, heightening the insult of Jason's behavior. Unable to watch Luster beg and bargain, Dilsey tells Jason to burn the tickets, which he does one at a time to protract his torment of Luster. Finally, Dilsey, at first opposed to Luster's attending the show at all, volunteers to get Luster the quarter he needs to attend the show, and, important, she does so in front of Jason.

Dilsey takes a clear stand with her words and actions in this scene. At its close, though Jason has burned the tickets, Luster will get to go to the show, owing nothing to Jason. Luster need not beg or bargain for Jason's cast-off tickets. Frony, his mother, has the disposable income to buy the ticket. That Frony can purchase Luster's ticket challenges how Jason imagines his relationship with Dilsey and her family. Constantly begrudging what he calls "feeding a kitchen full of niggers" and insisting that they are freeloading and taking advantage of him and his mother, Jason surely expects Luster to beg for the tickets. He likely would also have enjoyed either extracting extra labor from Luster in return or watching his face as he saw his only chance for attending the show literally go up in flames. Dilsey, however, undermines Jason's attempt to cast Luster in a subordinate position. When Dilsey tells Jason to burn the tickets and tells Luster she will get him money for a ticket to the show, she takes away Jason's power.

The above scene is representative of the changing reality of the South in the 1920's and 1930's. In offering the tickets to Luster for a price, Jason seeks to lord over Dilsey and Luster his perceived socioeconomic superiority. The Compsons—or at least Jason—do have more financial assets than Dilsey and her family. However, Dilsey's family is not as dependent on the Compsons as Catherine and Jason like to imagine. Though Jason often intimates that without his support, Dilsey and her family would go hungry, the text makes clear that the opposite is true. Dilsey and her family have the willpower and skills to keep the Compson home functioning, and without them, Jason and Caroline would stand little chance of maintaining the home or its residents. While Dilsey and her family are not wealthy, they do have at least enough disposable

income to send Luster to the traveling music show. If both money and skills are necessary for survival, Dilsey's family has a clear advantage over the Compsons.

The Appendix also makes clear that outside of employment with the Compsons, Dilsey's family find profitable work in industry. TP finds work in Memphis, Tennessee and has at least enough money to buy cheap suits, and Frony marries a Pullman porter and makes a home in St. Louis, Missouri and then in Memphis, Tennessee for her mother (Appendix 349). Dilsey's family has the opportunity for upward mobility. They have prospects for employment and new lives in new cities and are able to realize them. Craig Werner writes of Faulkner's depiction of Dilsey's family, "[Faulkner] consistently interpreted Afro-American behavior in static rather than kinetic terms, substituting 'endurance' for 'ascent' . . ." (37). However, if we look again at the interactions among Dilsey, Luster, and Jason, Dilsey's family's socioeconomic gains become even more evident. The show to which Jason has tickets and Luster wants to attend is evidently a desegregated show, though there almost certainly would have been segregated seating. For Jason, taunting Luster with the tickets reminds him of and reinforces his perceived economic superiority. However, when Dilsey tells Jason and Luster that Frony will buy him a ticket, the show and the ticket come to represent something quite different: Dilsey's family's potential for social and economic advancement. Luster has access to both the show and the money to purchase the ticket, representing changing levels of access to social and economic opportunities for Dilsey's family. In contrast, the Compson family is characterized by decreasing socioeconomic status.

What readers might expect throughout the novel is confirmed in the text's Appendix: Jason sells off the family plot piece by piece; Benjy is committed; Caroline dies; Miss Quentin is never heard from again. The Compson land and the Compson family will end at Jason's hands. However, is not only what the Compsons do throughout the text that heralds their extinction, it is what they neglect to do. As the text's black characters maintain a work ethic and skills and seek new ways to prosper in modern South—like employment in the railroad industry—each of the Compsons, except Miss Quentin, remain paralyzed in a world that has left them behind. Caroline

maintains her idle lifestyle, despite her family's need for her active participation in their care; and Benjy is incapable of affecting change. Miss Quentin chooses to run away rather than remain part of the family of which she was never truly a member. Jason, whose sole goal in life is to amass a significant amount of money to begin a new life away from the Compson home and land, tries to deal in cotton, the cash crop of the Old South, but loses big as the novel draws to a close and is then robbed by Miss Quentin. Bereft of his savings, the best he is able to accomplish is two rooms above his offices in downtown Jefferson, much the same living conditions as his former domestic servants in Memphis and St. Louis. Dilsey's family's achievement of economic upward mobility contrasted with the Compsons' downfall is one of the ways in which the text works to reverse the mammy-master dialectic and undermine paternalistic conceptions of black culture and life, ultimately privileging blackness.

Beyond the contrast of upward mobility with downward mobility, the text works to paint Dilsey and her family as foils to the Compsons in many ways. Significantly, before reaching the section that focuses on Dilsey and her family, readers have been privy to the thoughts and feelings of Benjy, Quentin, and Jason Compson. Except for the final section focused on Dilsey, each of the text's chapters takes on the mental state of the characters who narrates it. Benjy's section represents an existence without the structure of time or the intellectual ability to make meaning of experience; his section depicts sensory inputs and his visceral reactions to them. Quentin's section represents quite the opposite. His over-analysis of Caddy's loss of virginity and his intense and troubled emotions depict flawed logic and obsessive anxiety. Jason's section represents, in some ways, a middle ground. It depicts Jason's extreme emotional reactions to stressors—reactions often based on resentment and anger—and his callous practicality and greed. In the words of Olga Vickery, Dilsey “emerges . . . as a human being” in juxtaposition with the Compson children (47). Vickery continues, “There is no doubt but that Dilsey is meant to represent the ethical norm, the realizing and acting out of one's humanity; it is from this that the

Compsons have deviated, each to his own separate world” (Vickery 47).⁴ Dilsey’s humanity and compassion provides a stark contrast to Compson family members, and the placement of her section as the last of the novel sharpens the distinction between her and the family for whom she cares.

Appropriately, the final section of the book opens with Dilsey quite literally looking out into the world. She stands in her doorway, a cold, light rain blowing against her and “her myriad and sunken face lifted to the weather” (Faulkner 265). This image of Dilsey, a metaphor for her perseverance in the face of a harsh reality, depicts her unflinchingly facing the elements just as she faces the hard reality of caring for the dysfunctional Compson family. As Dilsey looks out of her door into the harsh elements, each of the remaining Compsons is isolated within his or her existence. Jason obsessively pursues money, thinking about little else than how to obtain more and protect the amount he has been able to amass. Benjy remains imprisoned in his own mind by his cognitive disability.⁵ And Caroline has retreated almost permanently into her bedroom under the cover of illness. The text never makes clear the validity of Caroline Compson’s complaints of physical illness. However, Quentin, whose narrative takes place in 1910, describes how he and his siblings would play under Caroline’s window when she was not too sick to leave her bed. In Jason’s and Dilsey’s sections she insists, again and again, that she will soon die, using her expectation of death to escape from responsibility for her family and judgment for her actions, past and present. Lee Jenkins describes Caroline Compson as “Cold, self-centered, unloving, and hypocritical, she uses all those around her to satisfy her hypochondrical needs and paralyzes and corrupts normal family relations” (144). Dilsey stands in particularly stark contrast to this description of Caroline. If Caroline is cold and self-centered, Dilsey is warm and giving. If Caroline paralyzes and corrupts family relations, Dilsey is the force that propels them. The text

⁴ For an in-depth discussion of each section and its depiction of reality, see Oglia Vickery’s “*The Sound and the Fury: A Study in Perspective.*”

⁵ Miss Quentin has already run away at this point in the text.

clearly juxtaposes Caroline and Dilsey. Though at times Dilsey represents the nostalgic role of mammy, her contrast to Caroline Compson situates her as a superior caretaker and human being. Her presence is an indictment of Caroline Compson's mothering, or lack thereof.

Lee Jenkins concludes in his exploration of Dilsey's characterization in *The Sound and the Fury*, ". . . even though the blacks, in the person of Dilsey, appear to exemplify a dignity and an endurance lacking in the whites . . . It is this dignity and endurance, according to the terms of her creation, of a victim who conspires in her own victimization . . ." (163). However, it is important here to note the historical moment in which Dilsey exists—it is a moment of transition in the American South. Dilsey, as an elderly woman in the 1920's, would have come of age during what historian Rayford Logan famously termed "the nadir of American race relations", the years between 1877 and 1901. In this era, resistance to white hegemony meant significant risks to personal security. Too, the words of Booker T. Washington would have rung loud in the South as Dilsey accepted—or inherited—her position in the Compson home. In his Atlanta Cotton Exposition speech, Washington urges blacks,

Cast [your bucket] down in agriculture, mechanics, in commerce, in domestic service, and in the professions . . . Our greatest danger is that in the great leap from slavery to freedom we may overlook the fact that the masses of us are to live by the productions of our hands, and fail to keep in mind that we shall prosper in proportion as we learn to dignify and glorify common labor. (7)

In many ways, Dilsey represents an allegiance to Washington's proposed path to racial uplift. However, by 1928, the discourse on racial equality had changed radically with the philosophies of activists like W.E.B. Du Bois and Marcus Garvey. Dilsey can be read as a bastion of Washintonian philosophy in a Du Boisian world. However, if Dilsey has cast down her bucket in domestic service and demonstrated the dignity of common labor, she also demonstrates, particularly in the passage in which Jason burns the tickets, resistance to Jason's attempts to situate she and family at the margins of social and economic life in Jefferson.

Dilsey's position as a taken-for-granted domestic servant living with the tyranny of Jason and helplessness of Caroline and Benjy is unenviable. However, her strength and warmth situate her as morally upright, emotionally stable, and competent. She deals with the same family members that drive Caroline to her bed, yet finds the strength to extend compassion and warmth to each one. She lives within means far more limited than Jason's, yet she gives freely to others, baking Benjy a birthday cake with her own money when Jason refuses to allow one. Though some have argued that it is her saintliness that positions her all the more firmly in the mammy tradition, Dilsey manages to walk a line between moral justness and shrewd resistance. As Philip M. Weinstein writes, ". . . the writer shows her *making* a life within conditions that we find repellent: not by endorsing those conditions but by sustaining her integrity despite them. Neither brainwashed nor in rebellion, she is *there* in the Compson household . . . someone the Compsons exploit but must also recon with" (163). Juxtaposed with the Compson family members, Dilsey appears in command of herself, her family, and the Compsons. Her position within the Compson home is one of power; without her, the physical needs of the family would go unmet and the fragile relationships between the Compsons would crumble. Dilsey and Luster's roles as the caretakers of a seemingly incompetent white family reverses paternalistic conceptualizations of the inferiority of blacks.

In his 1957 history of paternalistic attitudes in the south, Guion Griffis Johnson recounts one physician's voicing of common ideas about the inferiority of blacks: "(1) the Negro is a permanently inferior race, (2) desegregation in the public schools will lead to amalgamation, (3) amalgamation will cause the deterioration of the white race, and (4) the deterioration of the white race will destroy American civilization" (507). According to Johnson, these perspectives remained common among white southerners throughout the 1950's, over twenty years after the setting and publication of *The Sound and the Fury*. Though this particular line of reasoning

speaks to discussions of the desegregation of public schools in the 1950's, it is representative of the breed of racism that assumes racial hierarchies and black inferiority.

The Sound and the Fury works in multiple ways to undermine such assertions. To claim that the Negro is permanently inferior is to likewise claim that whites are permanently superior. The deterioration of the Compsons and the upward social and economic mobility of Dilsey's family speaks to the changing nature of the twentieth century south. As the Compsons become more degenerate, Dilsey's family must assume more responsibility for them, demonstrating their competency as well as their compassion. This fully reverses the hierarchical construction espoused above. Furthermore, the last half of the above argument asserts that miscegeny would ultimately lead to the deterioration of the white race, which in turn would lead to the fall of American civilization. The reasons for the deterioration of the Compsons are numerous and fodder for a separate study altogether. However, the text makes clear that it is the black domestic servants who hold the family together, staving off its downfall for decades. As the Appendix reveals, the Compson line ends with Jason and Benjy, Quentin and Caddy both having run away to new identities. The Compsons, representative of the landed gentry of the Old South, survive because of—not in spite of—their closeness with blacks. Meanwhile, Dilsey's family thrives, Froy's husband embracing the train and the economic possibilities it provides to blacks and TP embracing the vibrant black culture of the urban south. While the Compsons held tight to a failing way of life, Dilsey's family evolved.

Though Dilsey can seldom wield her power within the Compson household for her own benefit, the argument the text makes for the competence, strength, and humanity of the text's black characters boldly privileges blackness. While on the surface, Dilsey and her family seem to be at the mercy of the Compsons, depending on them for food and shelter, it is they who allow for the functioning of the Compsons. It is ultimately the Compsons who are at the mercy of Dilsey and her family, a major revision of the mammy-master dialectic. Jeremy Wells argues that

Faulkner, throughout his career, returns to the metaphor of “burden, of whiteness itself as a kind of weight” (169). In Wells’s argument, this does not necessarily mean that whites are “burdened by ‘negroes’”; however, the metaphor of burden can certainly be applied to the relationship between Dilsey and her family and the Compsons. The text characterizes Dilsey as the controlling entity within the Compson household, working to mitigate the effects of each of Compsons’ dysfunctions. It is also Dilsey and her family who can bring either care or harm to their charges, demonstrating the burden of caring for the Compsons and the power inherent in the very basis of domestic service.

Setting Dilsey’s physical and mental fortitude in contrast to Caroline’s weakness and her compassion in juxtaposition with Jason’s misanthropy and resentment, allows for a reading of Dilsey as in control of herself, her family, and the Compsons. The Compsons are, in contrast, deeply crippled, whether physically, mentally, or emotionally, and disempowered by their handicaps, Dilsey and her family emerge as the unstoppable force that keeps the Compson household in motion. However, Dilsey and her family are not one-dimensional caretakers; their acts of resistance demonstrate their complexity and their aspirations to leave behind the poverty and lack of agency associated with domestic servitude. Finally, Dilsey’s family’s prospects for and achievement of upward mobility challenge Old South concepts of fixed racial and social hierarchies.

Lottie Mae, George, and Lummy in *A Feast of Snakes*:

Harry Crews’s *A Feast of Snakes* takes place in fictional Mystic, Georgia in the mid 1970’s. Set in the deep south in the aftermath of the civil rights movement, the text contends with many white supremacist conceptualizations of blacks. Black labor is exploited, black women are raped, and black life takes place on the margins of Mystic’s white culture. Lottie Mae, George, and Lummy are three members of an unnamed black family who work for Joe Lon and Big Joe Mackey in Mystic, Georgia. The narrator explains the arrangement,

Lummy was George's brother. They both worked for Joe Lon Mackey. They'd worked for Joe Lon's daddy before they worked for Joe Lon. They'd never been told what they made in wages. And they had never thought to ask. They only knew at any given moment in the week whether they were ahead or behind on what they'd drawn on account. (Crews 15)

The matter-of-fact tone of this passage suggests a simple relationship; the families have for generations been linked to one another as employer and servant. The narrator fails to point out, however, that Lottie Mae, George and Lummy's niece, is also employed by the Mackeys as are their aunt and sometimes their young cousin, Brother Boy. The direct, casual tone of the narrator makes such arrangements seem straightforward and uncomplicated. But these relationships, as demonstrated in *The Sound and the Fury*, are far from simple.

The above passage reveals multiple ways in which Lottie Mae, George, and Lummy are depicted as stereotypical black domestic servants. Each week, the three are subject to the whims of Big Joe or Joe Lon, paid what their white employers see fit, not what they have earned. Bereft of ownership of their own labor, Lottie Mae, George, and Lummy are subject to much the same terms of labor in 1970 as they would have been in 1860. The narrator adds that neither George nor Lummy had ever thought to ask about their wages, suggesting that either they were not intelligent enough to ask or they had no interest in what they earned. The former reinforces racist perceptions of blacks as intellectually inferior to whites.⁶ The latter implies that they are content with having no control over their own wages. Further, that Joe Lon is responsible for settling the accounts insinuates that neither George nor Lummy are capable of managing their own money. The account that George and Lummy draw from is an equally troubling aspect of their depictions within the text. The account is not a cash advance on their pay; it is their account at the Mackey liquor store. The passage above implies that the liquor store account often consumes what pay George or Lummy may have received, alluding to racial stereotypes surrounding blacks and

⁶ See Guion Griffis Johnson's "Southern Paternalism toward Negroes after Emancipation".

substance abuse.⁷ The passage demonstrates ways in which the intersection of racial stereotypes and white paternalism results in the disempowerment of black domestic servants like Lottie Mae, George, and Lummy in the years following the civil rights movement. Though Jim Crow laws are no longer legal, blacks in Mystic have little socioeconomic mobility and face intense racism from the town's whites.

Within the text, these three servants are deprived even of the ownership of their own labor—their bodies and their time included. Even the most basic elements of their existence are possessed by Joe Lon and Big Joe. Their labor is not simply purchased based on an agreed upon price; it is taken from them by the Mackeys, who keep them disempowered even to ask how much they make. And though they perform all the work necessary to make each of the Mackey businesses successful, the text does not grant them any aspirations of breaking from the Mackeys to pursue their own, more profitable endeavors. Painted initially as apathetic, alcoholic, dupes, the text first situates Lottie Mae, George, and Lummy in roles as powerless domestic servants. However, labor and compensation are not the only areas in which the text depicts these black characters as helpless.

Much like the slaves and servants of the antebellum and reconstruction periods, Lottie Mae, George, and Lummy depend on Joe Lon and Big Joe for employment and for protection from other members of the white community. The text situates these characters within working relationships and communities that allow them little agency. The passage below provides a rich example of the extent to which they must rely on the Mackey family:

“Mistuh Joe Lon?”
“ . . . Everything’s fine,” he said. “You and George done a good job gitten them shitters ready.”
“Say we done good,” said Lummy. “Howsomever, it don be whatall I come to axe you bout.”
Joe Lon looked at him for the first time.
“It be Lottie Mae.”
“What about her?”

⁷ For an example of contemporaneous perceptions of the link between alcohol abuse and black men, see “Alcohol Abuse: A Crucial Factor in the Social Problems of Negro Men” by King, et al.

“I want to thanks you for gittin Mistuh Buddy to letter loose.”

Joe Lon said: “It’s all right. I’as glad to do it . . . You or George one got to stay at the store all day today . . .” Joe Lon blinked. It was as though Lummy had not heard him. And he knew Lummy would go on like that until her took care of Lottie Mae’s hex.

“He ain’t hexed nobody, much less Lottie Mae. I’ll tell him that being the sheriff, he better see who done it. Is that okay?”

“He ain’t gone do that.”

“He will if I tell him to.”

Lummy gave Joe Lon his blue-gummed smile. “Don think twice. George and me is put our minds on [the liquor store]. Go on and don think twice.” (57-8).

Lummy and Lottie Mae depend on Joe Lon to intercede for Lottie Mae with the Sheriff, who regularly rapes Lottie Mae. Any argument in her favor from a member of the black community would only cause more abuse (126). Lummy and George are powerless to speak or act out against a heinous crime committed against their niece. They are forced to keep quiet, surreptitiously seeking the help of Joe Lon, the only white in Mystic who cares enough about them to take even minor action.

At the close of the scene, Joe Lon agrees to speak with the Sheriff. However, Joe Lon’s thought process makes clear that his primary motive in doing so is to keep Lummy’s focus on the Mackey liquor store. Just like the slave owners and employers of black laborers before him, Joe Lon’s interest in protecting his black employees is rooted in a desire to profit from their work. Joe Lon tells the Sheriff when he questions him about Lottie Mae, “It bothers the niggers. If it bothers them, it bothers me . . . They unload the shitters. They hep me . . .” (36). Representative of white, paternalistic attitudes, Joe Lon’s concern for Lottie Mae equates to a concern for the productivity of her brothers, despite having grown up with Lottie Mae. Almost as troubling, in order to be granted this favor by Joe Lon, Lummy must engage in a well-rehearsed exchange of praises and appeals, thanking Joe Lon for his previous actions and cautiously asking for another favor.

Joe Lon’s treatment of Lottie Mae, George, and Lummy and their behavior toward him echo the relationships between slave and master. Parkhurst describes the husband of the “Black

Mammy”, commonly known as Uncle in southern folklore⁸: “The children were also fond of him, and he in turn was never happier than when granting some of their whims or those of the mistress. He was at everybody’s service” (357). Though Lummy is not the husband of a mammy figure, he is part of a family of domestic servants. In the passage above, Joe Lon immediately assumes Lummy has come to seek praise for a job well done; likewise, Lummy eagerly accepts the compliment and at the end of the exchange, with a large smile, thanks Joe Lon and hurries off to complete his assigned task. Lummy must, in order to help his niece, take on the role of Uncle. Far from being able to express the anger and rage he must feel about the rape of Lottie Mae, Lummy must, in order to achieve his ends, act out the role of the cheerful slave. He must be eager to complete his assigned task and abundantly thankful for Joe Lon’s lukewarm concern for Lottie Mae.

There is irony, too, in Lummy’s reliance on Joe Lon to help his niece, for it is Lottie Mae and her family that care for Joe Lon’s sister. Beeder is mentally ill and unable to care for herself in even the most basic ways, totally dependent on the care of Lottie Mae and her family. At one point in the novel, Lottie Mae makes the terrifying trek across Mystic in the midst of the Roundup to feed Beeder dinner. Like antebellum caretakers, Lottie Mae and her family are expected to care for their white charges at any cost. However, they cannot expect in return basic protection from members of the white community who seek to take advantage of and abuse them.⁹

Lottie Mae is, for much of the novel, representative of one such abuse. Though the mammy of antebellum times is often an elderly, asexual woman, the domestic servants of the twentieth-century faced the peril of rape. Micki McElya writes, “the figure of the mammy stood

⁸ See the Uncle Remus series of Joel Chandler Harris for examples of the Uncle character in southern folklore.

⁹ Many antebellum paternalists would argue that one of the unique benefits of slavery was that protection was offered to slaves. The argument goes that whether the slave had earned the respect of his or her owner or the slave was valuable to his or her owner, the slave could expect some level of protection. However, especially as it pertains to rape, plantation owners were often oblivious to or uninterested in the sexual abuse of their female slaves. For firsthand accounts, see Fannie Kimble Butler’s *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation in 1838-1839*.

at the place where affection for her and sexual violence met and became indistinguishable from one another” (147-8). This analysis illuminates the complexity of Buddy Matlow’s desire for Lottie Mae. Matlow systematically rapes Lottie Mae under the cloak of arresting her for unknown offenses, meeting her resistance with violence, intimidation, and confidence that the power differential between them is too great for her to pose a threat to his control over her. Matlow desires Lottie Mae, though one would certainly hesitate to describe his feelings as affection. He tells her just before he rapes her, “You know if you tell anybody I love you, I’ll kill you. You know that, don’t you?” (Crews 35). This moment, like others in the text, juxtaposes violence with desire. Matlow and Lottie Mae’s exchanges demonstrate the sexual exploitation and abuse often associated with oppression.

For much of the novel *Lottie Mae*, George, and Lummy occupy positions dictated by their roles as domestic servants still beholden to the traditions of mammies and uncles, disempowered in many ways. They have little to no power over their bodies, performing labor at the discretion of the Mackeys and facing sexual violence. Within the town of Mystic, Georgia and with the text, they are situated in roles as disempowered domestic servants. Yet they serve as powerful foils of the text’s white characters, deviating from whiteness in ways that privilege their actions, thoughts, and ways of life over those of whites. Even as George and Lummy play to the paternalism of Joe Lon, they achieve their means. Additionally, Lottie Mae, the most oppressed of the novel’s black characters, ultimately takes drastic action to escape the sexual abuse of Sheriff Matlow. It is at these points that these characters begin to stand as counterhegemonic figures.

Perhaps one of the most striking themes in *A Feast of Snakes* is the dysfunction of the characters’ romantic relationships. By his own admission, Joe Lon treats Elfie, his wife, like a dog. Big Joe drags his wife back to Mystic from Atlanta after she runs away with her lover, after which she commits suicide. At one point in the text, Joe Lon intimates that he learned to abuse Elfie from Big Joe, saying “We like that, don’t we? Me and you? Hem’m up in a room and

beat'm good?" (151). Joe Lon's reprehensible treatment of Elfie takes many forms. In addition to the mental and verbal abuse he deals to Elfie, Joe Lon often disregards Elfie's emotional wellbeing and their marriage vows. When his high school sweetheart, Berenice, returns to Mystic from college, he has sex with her as his wife stands in their front yard and his children sleep in the next room. The evidence of their sexual encounter is left on the sheets for Elfie to clean up while Joe Lon takes Berenice out for drinks and dancing at a local bar. Joe Lon idealizes his high school relationship with Berenice; however, it is hardly less perverse than his marriage to Elfie. He defines true love when they reunite after two years:

“Love,’ said Joe Lon, ‘is taking it out of you mouth and sticking it in you ass.’”

“Yes,’ she said, ‘oh, yes, that’s . . .’”

“But *true* love,’ he said, ‘goddamn *true* love is taking it out of you ass and sticking it in you mouth.’ He flipped her like a dole and she—flushed and swooning—went down in a great spasm of joy, sucking like a baby before she ever got there.” (121)

Joe Lon's definition of true love centers on a sex act and is conceptualized around a masculine world view. Like Matlow's, Joe Lon's is a depraved understanding of love, representative of the impossibility of healthy romantic relationships within the culture into which he has been socialized. His and other white characters' sexual and romantic interactions act as foils to those of the text's black characters. In this way, the text works to privilege blackness even as it disempowers Lottie Mae.

A Feast of Snakes often uses juxtaposition to make powerful statements about life in the fictional town of Mystic and the very real socio-cultural milieu of the twentieth century rural south. One point at which this tool proves particularly effective is the scene in which Joe Lon speaks of his and his father's abuse of their wives. The text intersperses throughout Joe Lon and Big Joe's conversation the internal dialogue of Lummy. The narrator states, “Lummy, who recognized this as something he was not meant to watch, got up quietly and headed for the door, thinking only how grateful he would be for a good plate of Real-Pit-Barbecue and then his woman's warm thick back to sleep against” (151). The two scenes outlined above can be

understood as representative of how each character conceptualizes loving relationships. Joe Lon's scene with Berenice represents sexual deviance and the soiling of the marriage bed. His relationship with Elfie is unenviable, characterized by Joe Lon's abuse and Elfie's passive acceptance of it. Clearly privileged within the text is Lummy's perception of his relationship, representative of traditional American ideals of love and romance. Lummy looks forward to spending time with his wife, to eating with her and falling asleep against her body. Far from enjoying abusing or sexualizing her, Lummy simply anticipates her nearness. There is an innocence in the image of Lummy asleep against her back after a large meal, a stark contrast to Joe Lon's sordid sexual encounter with Berenice and abusive marriage to Elife.¹⁰

The madness that characterizes *A Feast of Snakes* extends beyond the relationships among its characters. The Rattlesnake Roundup at the center of the novel's action culminates in the hunting and killing of thousands of snakes. This event sets the tone for the violence, aggression, and fear that permeate the festival. The rattlesnakes, most still hibernating, are pulled from their holes and slaughtered en masse. The dogfight the night before the big hunt culminates in the bloody maiming of both dogs. The brutality of the fight is intensified as the owner of the losing dog kicks it to death as it cowers, exhausted and in pain. The football field where the papier-mâché rattlesnake is burned acts as a reminder of the culture of football and ruthless competition around which the town revolves even as it is absorbed in the Roundup. While the all white constituency of the festival falls into a state of madness, the town's black citizens, represented primarily by Lottie Mae, George, and Lummy, stay clear of the festivities and rituals. Lottie Mae, Brother Boy, and Lummy admit being frightened by the seeming worship of the rattlesnake and the bloodshed that takes place on the final day of the festival. As the white

¹⁰ The narrator does reveal earlier in the text that Lummy and Lily, his wife, drink excessively, have physically harmed one another, and are unable to care for their child as a result. Their relationship appears to be one of extremes. Though this is certainly not representative of a healthy relationship, it is one in which each participant has agency and power. An in-depth analysis of the text's romantic relationships would contribute much to the scholarship about *A Feast of Snakes*; however such an undertaking is not appropriate within my analytical framework. More important within the above Lummy's perception of their relationship.

attendees become more violent, eventually rioting at the Miss Rattlesnake Queen pageant and overturning several RV's, Lummy wants nothing more than to get back to his wife and Lottie Mae watches the madness from the hilltop. The black characters maintain their distance from the festival's fevered pitch and brutality.

Aside from abstaining from the Roundup's festivities, the black characters bring order to the insanity that overtakes the event and its participants. One factor that exacerbates the madness of the festival is, in the words of Joe Lon, "human shit in quantities no one could believe" (17). The previous year's Rattlesnake Roundup resulted in a two-week cleanup of human waste. In the Roundup recounted in the text, the lack of water and overrunning "Johnny-on-the-Spots" cause riots as the Roundup comes to a close. The town, Joe Lon's campground included, is too small to accommodate the huge number of festival-goers, and the accumulating human waste is a visual and olfactory sign of the resulting insanity. Joe Lon and the narrator place much emphasis on the need for adequate bathroom facilities; Joe Lon thinks to himself at one point, "This year, though, they had the Johnny-on-the-Spots. Chemical shitters" (17). Yet this all-important task is left to George and Lummy. Though the two prove more than capable, leaving this responsibility to them contradicts the white characters' perceptions of blacks. Ultimately, though, it is the text's black characters that stand between controlled chaos and total mayhem.

The night before the rattlesnake hunters begin to arrive, Joe Lon goes home to his wife in a drunken stupor and, in a sense, rapes her, saying Berenice's name over and over as he pushes her head into the headboard. The scene is representative of the disorder of Joe Lon's life, the intersection of violence, nostalgia, and alcohol. As he terrorizes his wife, wrapped up in his own frenzied anticipation of the festival and the coinciding arrival of Berenice, George and Lummy set up the chemical toilets that will keep order for most of the festival. The next morning, after realizing what he has done to his wife, he visits the campground, "where sure enough Lummy and his brother George had set out the Johnny-on-the-Spots in just the neatest and best way, so that he could hardly believe it" (56). The narrator describes Joe Lon's campground on the opening day

of the festival: “Joe Lon’s field was over half full, and spaced neatly along the orderly rows of snake hunters were the white chemical outhouses called Johnny-on-the-Spots” (52). Though it is Joe Lon’s field, any semblance of order is imposed by George, Lummy, and their cousin RC.

RC works as a contrast to Joe Lon and the text’s other white characters in multiple ways. RC achieves the goal Joe Lon never does: attending college. Though he goes to a community college a couple of towns over instead of to a Division I university, RC escapes Mystic. RC tells the campers where to park, keeps track of how many spaces are left, takes the money, keeps the records, and deposits the money at the end of each day. Like George and Lummy, he is responsible for a Mackey business endeavor. All three of these characters contribute more to the successes of the Mackey businesses than do either Joe Lon or Big Joe. The text depicts these black characters as the stable, dependable, rational counterparts to the degenerate white characters.

Their roles as caretakers for the Mackey family and managers of the Mackey businesses give Lottie Mae, George, and Lummy ascendancy over both Joe Lon and Big Joe. Though both Joe Lon and Big Joe believe themselves to be harder working, smarter, and more entitled than blacks, the text works to prove otherwise.¹¹ While the Mackeys cannot manage even to care for themselves let alone their families, Lottie Mae and her family care for each other, the Mackey family, and the Mackey businesses. The text’s black characters have the skills that keep these business endeavors afloat, and the text very deliberately creates a contrast between the competent black characters and incompetent white characters. Yet the black characters are granted neither credit nor compensation for their labor, and, even more troubling, they are void of any aspirations to put their superior abilities to use for their own profit. While on the one hand, the text

¹¹ See pages 18, 57, and 69 for passages indicative of Joe Lon and Big Joe’s attitudes about blacks.

challenges conceptualizations of blacks as inferior to whites, it falls short of a critique of the socioeconomic oppression of blacks and robs them of ambition.¹²

If the Lottie Mae and her family are stuck in a cycle of poverty and oppression, Joe Lon Mackey's family is equally stagnant, perpetuating the dysfunction and rural poverty that characterizes Big Joe's life. Perhaps Joe Lon Mackey's ownership of several family businesses and mobile home on a small plot of barren land represent a slightly higher economic or social standing than Lottie Mae and her family enjoy, but within the context of Mystic, poverty is the standard. That George and Lummy are poor and have no plans to be otherwise differentiates them little from Joe Lon. Thus, though the hard work of George, Lummy, and RC will never result in profit beyond what Joe Lon decides to give them—or let them steal in RC's case—their poverty is as much a symptom of the backwater town of Mystic as of the racial prejudice of the town. While in *The Sound and the Fury* there exists a contrast between the upward mobility of Dilsey's family and the downward mobility of the Compsons, in *A Feast of Snakes* both blacks and whites are mired in rural poverty. Though this depiction of the socioeconomics of the south is less optimistic than that in Faulkner's text, it does place blacks and whites on equal footing.

While George and Lummy sustain the Mackey businesses, reminiscent of Dilsey and Luster's care for Benjy, Lottie Mae and her mother provide comprehensive care for Beeder, who Joe Lon and Big Joe prefer to keep out of sight and out of mind. Beeder has turned inside herself and her room to escape from the anger, violence, and cruelty that are a part of the Mackey household and the community of Mystic. The extremity of her behavior suggests she also struggles with mental illness. Both Joe Lon and Big Joe believe her illness is a choice instead of an affliction. Big Joe thinks to himself as he passes her doorway, "He hadn't raised his daughter to be crazy, goddammit. But she'd always been a headstrong girl and if she wanted to be crazy the rest of her life, that was her little red wagon and she'd have to pull it" (91-2). Joe Lon is

¹² For an in-depth exploration of whites' perceptions of blacks in the civil rights movement era, see Angus Campbell's 1971 study "White attitudes toward black people."

slightly more compassionate; the narrator states, “He felt a rush of pity at his heart for Beeder” (46). However, at one point Joe Lon admits to occasionally shaking her and demanding that she return to normal. Neither Joe Lon nor Big Joe can face Beeder’s mental illness and the conditions in which she lives. After he visits her in her room, Joe Lon drinks a fifth of liquor in an attempt to “shake the image of his sister easing her befouled head back into the pillow” (51). In contrast to Joe Lon and Big Joe, Lottie Mae and her mother cook for Beeder, bathe her and clean her room, and provide her with her only regular human contact.

When Lottie Mae and her mother neglect to come, Beeder does not eat nor does her bedpan get emptied. Though Lottie Mae and her mother do not provide the nurturing Dilsey provides Benjy, they do provide the basic care she would otherwise go without. Big Joe thinks to himself as he prepares breakfast for his fighting dogs, “Beeder wouldn’t get anything else until tomorrow when the cook came” (91). Though Big Joe does not mind preparing a meal for his depraved, caged dogs, he will not do the same for his mentally ill, equally imprisoned daughter. While Big Joe cannot bring himself to cross from the hallway into his daughter’s room, Lottie Mae traverses the town of Mystic to care for Beeder. Though at face value, crossing town may not appear to be a significant commitment to Beeder’s wellbeing, the circumstances surrounding Lottie Mae’s trip across the town makes clear that she is more concerned about Lottie Mae’s welfare than are either Big Joe or Joe Lon.

After Matlow rapes Lottie Mae and terrorizes her with his pet snake, Lottie Mae is traumatized. Terrified by snakes before her jail-cell rape, afterwards Lottie Mae confounds the threat of white male sexuality with the snakes at the center of the Rattlesnake Roundup (122). As she traverses the town to go home and then to the Mackeys’, she perceives threats all around her. Yet, terrified as she is on her way home, she ventures back into Mystic and crosses through the festivities to care for Beeder. Though her mother, understanding that there is something wrong with Lottie Mae, encourages her to allow Big Joe to take care of himself and Beeder for the evening, Lottie Mae makes the trip. Later the same day, Lottie Mae is called upon again to visit

the Mackey home to care for Big Joe and Beeder. However, this time, she does not go, although she knows it means Beeder will not eat. The narrators explains, “Lottie Mae had been told to go back to Big Joe’s to cook again, but Brother Boy had not been sent with her this time and she did not go. She had meant to go . . . but she quickly forgot what that was or where she was going . . . “ (122). Though this brings into question the level of Lottie Mae’s compassion and care for Beeder, it strengthens an argument in favor of Lottie Mae as a counterhegemonic figure. Though she does care about Beeder and is willing to care for her when others are not, Lottie Mae ultimately privileges her own needs over Beeder’s. This sets her up as both the humanistic better of Joe Lon and Big Joe and an independent actor not beholden to a sense of loyalty to the white family for whom she cares.

Lottie Mae’s castration of Sheriff Buddy Matlow is the culmination of her resistance of white hegemony. After believing for days that snakes surround her and are a constant threat to her safety and after an extended conversation with Beeder about the necessity of “killing hit”, Lottie Mae identifies an escape from harassment. She places a razor in her shoe and carries it with her everywhere until she meets Buddy Matlow again. When Matlow places a snakeskin condom, complete with fangs, on his penis, both in the text and in the mind of Lottie Mae, the threats of white male sexuality and the omnipresent snake are once again united. This signals to Lottie Mae that she must indeed “kill hit”. With the razor, she castrates Matlow, leaving him to bleed out in his police car. With this act, Lottie Mae conquers the snake and Matlow, both of which represent the danger she faces on a daily basis. The narrator gives insight into Lottie Mae’s state of mind just before she kills “the snake”: “The world had become dangerous. What she had always feared would happen had happened, although she did not know what it was she feared until it happened” (122). When Lottie Mae is raped, the world becomes a dangerous place for her. The threat her race and gender pose to her personal safety become evident to her, though it has always lurked just below the surface.

With one act, though, Lottie Mae regains her safety. She tells Beeder, “Just hit that snake with a razor. Tetch hit. One time. Gone forever. Outta my air. Outta my plate. Don’t tetch my skin like clothes” (133). Unlike Beeder and Joe Lon, Lottie Mae identifies and eliminates what threatens her wellbeing. Seeking an escape from the violence and cruelty of her father, Beeder retreats into her room. Joe Lon lives paralyzed by nostalgia and regret, eventually lashing out not at those who are responsible for his failures but against those who represent what he lacks.¹³ Lottie Mae, however, takes decisive action against her oppressor. She, uniquely within the text, identifies what threatens her and directs her anger at it, not misdirecting it either inward or outward.

On the surface, *A Feast of Snakes* seems to situate Lottie Mae, George, and Lummy in roles as subservient domestic laborers. However, through juxtaposing them with degenerate, white characters, the text ultimately portrays them as superior to whites in a multitude of ways. Though they must often work within the oppressive frameworks of white paternalism, Lottie Mae, George, and Lummy lead lives that offer them happiness and satisfaction, even if it is alongside subjugation and poverty. While the white snake hunters and citizens of Mystic languish on the brink of chaos, the black domestic laborers impose order and maintain perspective on the brutality of the Roundup’s festivities. While the white characters demonstrate many of the worst traits of humanity—cruelty, violence, deceit, and self-loathing among them—the black characters demonstrate kindness, competence, and a sense of purpose. The black citizens of Mystic are not perfect; to depict them as such would be to turn them into caricatures. However, Lottie Mae, George, and Lummy abide by a basic moral code, caring for others and restoring order to the madness of the Roundup.

While the Mackeys cannot tear themselves from whiskey, dogfighting, and spousal abuse long enough to run the family businesses, George and Lummy can barely wait to flee from these

¹³ There are other characters who act out: Buddy Matlow feels entitled to rape Lottie Mae because of his loss of his leg. Joe Lon’s mother kills herself to get back at Big Joe. Joe Lon kills the shoe salesman because he is angry at his mother for committing suicide and at his father for driving her to it.

scenes after working in the Mackeys' liquor store, homes, or campground. Likewise, the moral integrity of the text's black characters stands in stark contrast to the depravity of the whites. Even Lottie Mae's castration of Matlow seems righteous when the narrator explains, "Her fight wasn't with Buddy Matlow. Her fight was with the snake" (127). The text, like *The Sound and the Fury*, is not an unwavering antiracist text. Even as it challenges racist perspectives of blacks, it denies them the possibility of upward mobility granted to Dilsey and her family. However, *A Feast of Snakes* ultimately works to reverse the mammy-master dialectic and undermine racist, paternalistic conceptions of black culture and life, privileging blackness as it is contrasted with the text's white characters.

Aibileen and Minny in *The Help*

Turning our attention back to Hayden White for a moment, we might remember his declaration that historical fiction must depict "the range of feelings induced by the experience of an extraordinary *historical* condition" (147). The historical condition of Jackson, Mississippi in the early 1960's, the era in which *The Help* is set, is one with which many of us are familiar. Some major events leading up to the first pages of the text, set in August of 1962, include the Freedom Ride's stop in Montgomery, during which they were violently attacked, and the series of bombings in Birmingham that included Martin Luther King, Jr's home and the 16th Street Baptist Church.¹⁴ These events, major milestones in the history of the civil rights movement and the United States, represent the desires of blacks to proactively seek their rights and freedoms and the dangers they face for doing so. That blacks were the driving force behind the civil rights movement, afraid but willing to risk their safety to stand against oppression, abuse, and second-class citizenship, seems to be lost on *The Help*. The text fails to faithfully reproduce "the range of feelings induced by the experience of an extraordinary *historical* condition" (White 147). Instead, *The Help* relies on an outdated paradigm, one that understands whites as saviors, blacks as satisfied with lifelong employment by whites, and black women as always some variation of

¹⁴ Information taken from the Alabama Department of Archives & History.

the mammy myth. *The Help* does not deliver complex, realistic understandings of people or history. Instead, the text recasts black characters into mammy roles to a far greater degree than do either *A Feast of Snakes* or *The Sound and the Fury*, both written decades before.

The Help claims to be a story of black and white women “suffocating within the lines that define their town and their times. And sometimes lines are made to be crossed” (“Synopsis”). However, a close reading reveals that the text works instead to perpetuate racial boundaries. The text makes many motions toward the goal of breaking down racial barriers—enough to make clear the text is not a satire of race relations or of how race relations are talked about and treated by naïve whites. Yet the characters of Aibileen and Minny and their circumstances as the text draws to a close represent a text that polices the boundaries it seeks to illuminate. In last chapter narrated by Skeeter, the text triumphantly depicts her as having come to an understanding that “Not that much separates [women]. Not nearly as much as I’d thought”(Stockett 418). However, the text sends quite a different message as Skeeter leaves for a vibrant career in New York and Aibileen and Minny remain in Jackson, their situations little changed from the novel’s opening pages.

The Help follows the composition of *Help*, a collection of autobiographical stories of black maids in Jackson, Mississippi. Skeeter, a young, white recent college graduate, compiles and rewrites the oral narratives of all the maids except one, Aibileen, who composes her own chapter. For much of the text Skeeter does represent a white character ignorant of the realities of racial strife. However, he tells Mrs. Stein, the editor who agrees to read her book, “everyone knows how we white people feel, the glorified Mammy figure who dedicates her whole life to a white family. Margaret Mitchell covered that. But no one ever asked Mammy how she felt about it” (105-6). Skeeter’s other goal for the book is gaining experience and recognition—if only from Mrs. Stein—as a writer. For the maids, the goal of *Help* is to effect change. Aibileen decides to join the project after she realizes that she “can’t keep [Mae Mobley] from turning out like her mama” (28). The rest of the maids agree to contribute their narratives after Yule Mae is put in

jail after being accused of stealing from Hilly (253). Though, at least in part, Skeeter's motives are self-serving and exploitative, she and the rest of the maids unite under the pretenses of bringing forward black voices, encouraging critical thinking about racial and economic stratification, and changing the way black domestic workers are thought of and treated by white employers.

Though *The Help* cannot be said to have the same motives as *Help*, it does work to be read as a text about bringing races together. This sense of triumphantly overcoming racial and socio-cultural boundaries extends to Minny and Aibileen's final sections as well as Skeeter's. However, *The Help* ultimately fails to take into account the complexity and collusion of race, power, and history and in doing so appears retrogressive in its treatment of blacks, even in comparison with *The Sound and the Fury* and *A Feast of Snakes*, written in the 1930's and 1970's, respectively. Though there are moments in the text ripe for challenging the white hegemony of the 1960's US, many of them pass by, leaving power structures unchallenged and intact. Even the publishing of the book at the center of the novel's action, *Help*, results only in the advancement Skeeter's career; the treatment of the town's domestic servants remains largely unchanged.

From the opening pages, *The Help* situates Aibileen as a mammy in many ways: she has no family of her own; is asexual; has a healthy fear of whites; and, most important, she adores her white "babies". Aibileen's affection for Mae Mobley, the child she cares for throughout the text, often resembles that a mother has for a child. Abi refers to her as "my special baby" (4). In the face of Elizabeth's intolerance of and general annoyance with Mae Mobley, Aibileen often supplies the physical and emotional affection her mother does not (4). In a scene representative of their relationship, Abi tells Mae Mobley "You one of em, too. All the babies I tend to, I count as my own" (284). Moments later Mae Mobley says, "Aibee, you're my real mama." (284). Though Aibileen corrects her, telling her "I's just teasing you, about all them seventeen kids

being mine . . . They ain't really. I only had one child," it is clear Aibileene's feelings toward the children for whom she cares extend beyond the bounds of working relationships (285).

As noted by Parkhurst, one important aspect of a mammy was that she devote herself to the care of her white charges. *The Help* cleverly perpetuates the myth of the devoted mammy through Aibileen. The text removes Aibileene's son in a tragic death that masquerades as an acknowledgment of whites' violence toward blacks in 1960's Mississippi.¹⁵ In removing Trelore in a tragic death in which whites are at fault—but not too much so—Aibileene need not purposely privilege Mae Mobley over him. She is free to shower Mae Mobley with all her motherly love without the complication of children of her own. Aibileen says on page one of the novel, "Mae Mobley my special baby" (1). Below that is white space, followed by "I lost my own boy, Trelore, right before I started waiting on Miss Leefolt" (2). This passage is indicative of the text's efforts to replace black children with white ones in the arms and hearts of black domestic servants. With the convenient removal of Trelore, white characters (and readers) get to have their cake and eat it, too, so to speak. The Leefolt's get their devoted domestic servant with no family ties to detract from her role in their family, yet they have no reason to feel guilty either about Trelore's death or about Aibileen's nights and weekends in their service. In this way, *The Help* situates Aibileen as a mammy figure void of any challenge to the ethicality or authenticity of the relationships between black mammies and their charges.

The Help, just as it works to present a largely uncomplicated depiction of race relations in 1960's south, feigns an effort to allow Aibileen and the text's other black characters expression of the anger and bitterness they feel toward whites. While *The Help* allows Aibileen the latitude to criticize whites in her internal monologues, it denies her the ability to give voice to those

¹⁵ Trelore's death, however, is a halfhearted attempt to contend with racial violence in Mississippi. Instead of dealing frankly with white aggression—lynching, arson, murder, rape—the text poses a scenario in which whites are not necessarily responsible for the death of a young black man. The white mill workers do not brutally beat him or castrate and hang him; they only leave him at the door of the hospital to bleed to death.

criticisms. This creates a character through which the text points out racial strife and gestures toward equality but ultimately maintains racial norms. One fundamental element of the mammy role is that she never expresses significant anger toward whites. Though she may chide and protest as Parkhurst describes, ultimately, because of the enormous power differential between her and her owners or employers, her complaints are impotent. They are only shallow criticisms, posing no significant threat to white power. It is within these parameters that Aibileen's reaction to Treelore's death is contained.

Aibileen reacts to her son's death with deep sorrow, depression, and resignation. She recounts her reaction, "that was the day my whole world went black . . . Took three months fore I even look out the window, see if the word still there" (2). Aibileen goes on to say, "But it weren't too long before I seen something in me had changed. A bitter seed was planted inside me. And I just didn't feel so accepting anymore" (3). The text asserts, through Aibileen's voice, that she felt both sorrow and bitterness after Treelore's death. And though several times Aibileen mentions a bitter "seed" growing inside her, her feelings are never given voice, even to Minny and Skeeter. The text's frontloading of Aibileen's seething emotions suggests that they will grow and she will eventually express her hostility. As the text works to demonstrate the hardships of domestic labor, Aibileen has many opportunities to express her bitterness, if only to her close friends or Skeeter.¹⁶ However, Aibileen's resentment of whites rarely manifests, and when it does it is in reference to the mistreatment of white children and takes the form of biting her tongue or taking deep breaths (19). Too, her negative reactions to the text's white women are not representative of her emotional response to the white domination and violence in Jackson that led to Treelore's death, instead she is responding as the protector of her whites "babies." Though Aibileen's refusal to show resentment for whites can be explained by her need for her job with

¹⁶ There are countless dialogues between Aibileen and Minny and Aibileen and Skeeter in which Aibileen has the opportunity to criticize Elizabeth Leefolt or other whites, yet she never expresses anger or resentment. See pages 225-227 for an example. If she expresses these emotions in her chapter, readers are never privy to them, as *The Help* never reveals what Aibileen writes.

the Leefolts, the novel's close presents an opportunity for Aibileen to finally express her anger and bitterness. However, the moment passes without Aibileen expressing any ill will toward white characters.

In the final scene of *The Help*, Hilly, the novel's primary antagonist, accuses Aibileen of stealing several pieces of silverware. However, Aibileen quickly realizes, as Hilly insists that she return the silver by the end of the day, that Hilly's accusation has nothing to do with theft; Hilly is retaliating for the publishing of *Help*. Early in the scene, Hilly makes clear that Aibileen will no longer work for the Leefolts and that she intends to press charges for the theft of the silver. Though Aibileen's employer, Elizabeth Leefolt, is not convinced of Aibileen's guilt, she stands quietly by as Hilly insists that Aibileen is fired. At this point in the scene, Aibileen has nothing to lose. She has been fired from the Leefolts' home; will not be able to obtain a reference from them, ruling out future work as a domestic; and is facing possible jail time. Aibileen has the opportunity to speak her mind, to give voice to the bitterness that, according to her internal monologue, has been building up since Treelore was allowed to die at the steps of the hospital. After Mrs. Leefolt leaves the room, Aibileen does threaten to tell everyone in Jackson that Hilly ate the chocolate pie into which Minny baked her own feces. This assertion of her limited power within the interaction should not go unnoticed. However, she never expresses the bitterness she feels earlier in the text when Elizabeth insists she "Clorox the white bathroom again real good" after she uses it for the last time or when Elizabeth spansks Mae Mobley for using the "dirty" and "diseased" colored bathroom. The moment passes, and Aibileen expresses to neither Hilly nor Elizabeth any significant contempt for them, the white community of Jackson, or their treatment of the black community. Neither does she voice her anger for being falsely accused of theft. At the scene's close, Aibileen's asks Elizabeth, "'Miss Leefolt, are you . . . sure this what you . . .'" (443). After Hilly glairs at them both, Elizabeth apologizes, confirming that Aibileen must go, and Aibileen collects her things and leaves. Though she feels a sense of freedom after leaving the Leefolts' and her time as a maid behind, missing from the dialogue and her internal monologue as

she walks down the Leefolt's driveway is any significant commentary on the injustice of her termination, the inadequacy of Elizabeth's parenting, or the ridiculousness of the outdoor bathroom she must use, all issues that have prompted resurgences of her bitterness.

An argument may be made that Aibileen's reluctance to speak out even after she has little else to lose is a reasonable response in the midst of pre-civil rights Mississippi. She might expect retaliation as she describes earlier in the text when she laments the wrath white women sometimes unleash on their black help (187-8). However, Aibileen could have reasonably expected any complaints to Minny or Skeeter to be kept secret, and Minny's frequent criticisms of her white employers give Aibileen many chances to chime in with her own frustrations. Beyond criticizing her employers around her friends, Minny often confronts her employers directly, protesting their treatment of her and their unreasonable demands. Though many times she lost her job as a result of her outspokenness, she does not face—within the fictional Jackson, Mississippi created in *The Help*—other, more serious repercussions. It stands to reason, then, that Aibileen could expect the same. She could have given voice to her bitterness, or at least vehemently asserted her innocence, without fearing for her safety.¹⁷ Instead, Aibileen maintains her silence, and in turn, the text fails to be “‘true’ to the range of feelings induced by the experience of an extraordinary *historical* condition of subjection and humiliation” (White 147). Instead of faithfully representing the voice of the domestic workers both *Help* and *The Help* works to depict, the text depicts Aibileen as the ideal domestic servant, silently exiting her employer's home in shame, careful not to make a scene in the suburban white neighborhood.

¹⁷ Additionally, Aibileen's silence at the close of *The Help* is incompatible with her earlier characterization. She tells readers her worst days as a maid were those she spent with the Dudley family, waiting in the kitchen “to put the salve on them hose-pipe welts” after John Green Dudley's father finished “trying to beat the girl out a that boy” (284-5). She goes on to say, “I wish to God I'd told John Green Dudley he ain't going to hell. That he ain't no sideshow freak . . . I wish to God I'd filled his ears with good things like I'm trying to do Mae Mobley” (285). Earlier in the text, Aibileen says after being asked to use the bathroom in the garage from that day on, “I . . . feel that bitter seed grow in my chest, the one planted after Treelore died. My face goes hot, my tongue twitchy. I don't know what to say to her. All I know is, I ain't saying it” (29). The above passages demonstrate Aibileen's desire to speak out. In the first passage, she regrets not having spoken, and in the latter, she wishes she could speak. Yet, at the text's close, she exits the Leefolt's home silently.

Aibileen is situated securely within the mammy tradition in many ways, except that unlike the mammies of the antebellum era, the text disallows her even the minimal latitude to criticize whites.

Equally troubling, is the text's denial of Aibileen's contributions to both Miss Myrna and *Help*. It has been Aibileen who has provided the answers to the Miss Myrna, a home cleaning column, all along, neither resenting Skeeter's reliance on her skills nor accepting the money Skeeter offers her for having helped. When Skeeter initially approaches Aibileen, acknowledging it is unfair for her to claim Aibileen's answers as her own, Aibileen "shakes her head, 'I don't mind that. I just ain't so sure Miss Leefolt gone approve'" (Stockett 79). Aibileen's labor, already exploited by the Leefolt's through the nominal wage they pay her, is further alienated from her by Skeeter. Aibileen's knowledge is passed off as Skeeter's, who profits financially from it, and then further obscured with its publication in a white newspaper under the name of Miss Myrna. Like the work Lummy and George perform for the Mackey family, Aibileen stands to gain little from her labor as the expert behind the column. However, unlike Joe Lon Mackey, Skeeter has the possibility of upward mobility. Her role at the newspaper is a starting point for a writing career, and with the publication of *Help* she has the guarantee of a job in New York. Yet Aibileen, without whom Skeeter could neither have answered the questions written to Miss Myrna nor convinced the other maids to participate in writing *Help*, has no possibility for upward mobility, even at the text's close. In this way, when compared with *The Sound and the Fury* and *A Feast of Snakes*, *The Help* appears particularly retrogressive in its imagining of the socioeconomic mobility of blacks.

Before departing for New York, Skeeter resigns her post as Miss Myrna and tells the editor of the newspaper that the next author of the column should be Aibileen. The editor agrees, under the condition that Aibileen not tell anyone she is the author. Ironically, Skeeter's final act in Jackson, Mississippi before moving to New York City situates Aibileen just as soundly with the mammy myth as do the actions of Hilly or Elizabeth. Aibileen responds to Skeeter's offer of

the position with shock and gratitude: “Me? Working for the white newspaper? . . . Thank you, Miss Skeeter. For this, for *everthing*” (435). Aibileen remains situated in a deferent role, thanking Skeeter for “*everthing*” and taking no credit for or ownership of her role in either “Miss Myrna” or *Help*. If Skeeter’s assertion that the book narrows the gap between women is true, Aibileen’s feelings of self-worth and the way Aibileen and Skeeter treat one another should be changed. Yet their interaction at the close of *The Help* reveals that little about their relationship has evolved. Skeeter bequeaths her position at the newspaper to Aibileen, continuing her role as the text’s white savior; and Aibileen vehemently thanks her for “*everthing*”, deemphasizing her pivotal roles in Miss Myrna and *Help*. Likewise, Skeeter accepts Aibileen’s thanks with teary eyes instead of returning her thanks for what Aibileen has done for her. In this scene, Skeeter shows no appreciation for Aibileen’s contributions and takes on the role, even if passively, of white benefactor. A scene that might have ended in the mutual acknowledgment of shared triumph turns into another scene indicative of the novel’s maintenance of racial hierarchy.

The mammy figure can, as Parkhurst notes, negotiate some power within her role in the white family.¹⁸ Because of whites’ dependence on and longstanding relationship with the domestic servants that resemble the mythical mammy, these maids and nurses can exert limited power over the white household and their positions within it.¹⁹ However, in the first half of the twentieth century, as the model for domestic labor moved away from employing black women as lifelong employees and toward a model in which domestic workers were replicable and interchangeable, whatever power longtime domestic servants had within her working

¹⁸ Minny’s role within *The Help* is far more complex than the following brief analysis will unpack. Further examination of her characterization and role as catalyst for change is a rich direction for scholarship about *The Help*. However, I will deal narrowly with her characterization and its allegiance to the myth of the mammy.

¹⁹ Accounts of the power of longtime maids within white homes are undoubtedly exaggerated and romanticized by those that sought to depict the myth of the mammy through the lens of nostalgia. However, historical records, like those housed at the University of North Carolina’s *Documenting the American South* archives, demonstrate that longstanding relationships between employers and domestic employees often engendered loyalty on either side of the relationship, for better or worse. As a result, longtime maids had more latitude within their roles and white homes, though that power is often exaggerated. For specific examples, see the “Oral Histories of the American South” collection and the “The Civil Rights Movement” section within it.

relationships with whites was nullified. They no longer had the opportunity to build within white households the capital that might allow them to exert control, however limited, over the conditions of their labor. Minny and her experiences within *The Help* are representative of this shift in reality for both domestics and their employers. *The Help* demonstrates, through Minny, the way in which the racial climate of the mid-twentieth century stripped maids of the little power they might have wielded to their advantage through their roles as domestic laborers. Thus, the only benefit black domestics may have derived from the myth of the mammy disappeared.

In her dealings with Celia Foote, Minny's character demonstrates the collusion of nostalgia for mammy and changing race relations. Minny is depicted with many of the traits of a mammy: she is overweight, is a good cook, enjoys cleaning, and has emotional ties to the white family who employ her. She also embodies many of the characteristics Parkhurst outlines as necessary to a mammy: self-respecting, independent, forward, strong, warm-hearted, fearless, popular, brave, good, pious, quick-witted, capable, proud, regal, courageous, skillful, dignified, neat, quick, competent, possessed with a temper, trustworthy, tyrannical, sensible, discreet, efficient, careful, harsh, devoted, truthful, neither servile nor apish (353). Aibileen says of Minny, "Problem is, Minny got a mouth on her. She always talking back. One day it be the white manager a the Jitney Jungle grocery, next day it be her husband, and ever day it's gone be the white lady she waiting on. The only reason she waiting on Miss Walter so long is Miss Walter be deaf as a doe-nob" (Stockett 7). Minny admits later in the text, "The last thing I need [my husband] to know is that I've told off another white lady and lost another job" (226). However, even this seemingly undesirable trait in a maid has a place within the mammy myth. Minny's wise-cracking is reminiscent of Hattie McDaniel's portrayal of Scarlett O'Hara's mammy in *Gone with the Wind*. In a text that directly references Mitchell's tome a half dozen times, with Minny referencing it herself twice, depicting Minny as a "sass-mouthing" (Stockett

39).²⁰ black domestic brings *The Help* directly into dialog with depictions of the “sassy Mammy” as Frankie Y. Bailey terms the role.

Though certainly there were limitations to what antebellum or Reconstruction-era mammy figures could get away with saying to their white owners and employers, the type of bossing Minny doles out to Celia certainly falls into the purview of the traditional mammy. Concerned for Celia’s health and the health of her unborn child, Minny chides Celia for drinking what Minny believes is alcohol. She tells Celia,

All this time, there I was thinking you were dying a the cancer or sick in the head. Poor Miss Celia, all day long . . . Oh, I know you ain’t sick. I seen you with them bottles upstairs. And you ain’t fooling me another second. I ought to pour them things down the drain. I ought to tell Mister Johnny right now . . . You act like you want kids but you drinking enough to poison a elephant! (224-5)

Before Minny begins the passage quoted above, she tries to keep quiet, telling herself, “To say something would mean I cared about her and I don’t” (223). By Minny’s own admission, she criticizes Celia because she cares about her, much as she does not want to. The white fantasy of the mammy who cares deeply for the family for whom she works is played out in this passage. Because her criticism of Celia comes from concern for her health, positioning her as the caring servant, the defiance and wit that on the surface make Minny seem like a character who resists white dominance is in the end only another avenue through which she is disempowered. However, in the context of the 1960’s, this typical mammy-master interaction ends in Celia firing Minny. What the scene reveals is another troubling layer in *The Help*’s depiction of Minny: after performing the mammy role just as *Gone with the Wind* and white culture have told her to, Minny is fired. Celia’s firing of Minny reminds her she is at the mercy of her white employer and that no matter her opinions or their motives, ultimately her white employer determines where the line between them is and when it is crossed.

²⁰ Minny’s mother uses this term to describe talking back to white employers.

Minnie represents the myriad ways in which the mammy myth and the socio-cultural milieu of the pre-civil rights south exert sometimes contradictory, always disempowering influences on domestic servants. *The Help*'s depiction of Minnie also demonstrates the persistence of these issues into the twenty-first century. Part of *The Help*'s happy ending for each of its major characters is Minnie's regaining her job in a tender moment between her and the Footes. In the scene, Johnny, Celia's husband, thanks Minnie for having saved Celia's life. To repay her, Johnny offers her a job for life, telling her, "You'll always have a job here with us, Minnie. For the rest of your life, if you want" (405). Right away, Minnie accepts, saying, "'Thank you, sir,' and I mean it. Those are the best words I could hear today" (405). A lifelong position with the Footes is eerily reminiscent of antebellum and reconstruction-era portrayals of mammies. Just as Dilsey stays with the Compsons until Jason forces her to leave, Minnie, the text suggests, will spend her life in the service of the Footes. As Minnie moves to exit the room after she thanks Johnny for his offer, the Footes ask her to stay, and though she is about six months pregnant with twins, they do not ask her to sit with them at the stately dining room table. She stands against the wall and shares in the Footes' grief over Celia's infertility. This moment highlights both the intimacy and maintenance of boundaries expected of Minnie. The Footes want her to share in this intimate moment, but they want her to do it from a distance.

The Help decenters conceptualizations of Minnie as a mammy figure as well as conceptualizations of her as a domestic laborer. In Minnie, the text creates a character who cannot change, or even play, the role in which she is situated because she does not know the rules. When she plays the role of mammy, speaking frankly to Celia out of concern for her health, she is fired for overstepping her bounds. When she returns to work as a domestic, maintaining boundaries between herself and Celia, she is cast into the role of mammy, with a lifetime position in the Foote home and the sharing of intimate moments. The miniscule opportunities for agency and power available to a domestic cast in the role of mammy are nullified when she cannot speak honestly with her employers for fear of losing her job. Likewise, the boundaries a domestic

servant might maintain between herself and her employers are broken down when she is expected to be a liminal member of the Foote's family. Thus, Minny's hybrid role in the Foote household represents the most disempowering aspects of mammy-hood and domestic servitude. Minny's acceptance of the Footes' offer might be read with cynicism and full realization of the ever-changing terms of Minny's service, and thus as an astute commentary on domestic labor in the 1960's, except that *The Help*'s conclusion works very hard to elicit a sense of optimism negating any serious consideration of the fates of Minny and Aibileen.

In the final sentences of *The Help*, Aibileen describes Minny as "free." In the pages preceding this statement, Aibileen credits Minny's guarantee of employment with the Footes as a major reason Minny finally leaves Leroy (438). Thus, because of—not despite—Minny's prospective lifelong tenure with the Footes, Aibileen considers her to be free. As she leaves the Leefots' home for the last time, Aibileen imagines herself having the freedom she attributes to Minny (443). Johnny's offer is read by Aibileen and depicted within the text as liberating and not as an extension of the mammy myth.

A Feast of Snakes and *The Sound and the Fury* juxtapose black and white characters, resulting in the valorization of black characters and privileging of black culture and life over white. Additionally, both texts imagine a world in which blacks enjoy socioeconomic mobility equal to if not greater than that of whites. Furthermore, each text uses these portrayals to resist and subvert the dominant white supremacist discourses of the eras in which the texts were set and written. *The Help*, however, does something quite different. Using the paradigm of 1960's race relations, the text depicts the experiences of black maids. Yet, unlike Primo Levi's work, held out by Hayden White as an example of historical fiction at its most effective, there is "conflict between the referential function of [the text's] discourse and the expressive, affective and poetic functions" (147). Aibileen and Minny cannot even be called mimetic representations of 1960's domestic workers. They do not represent thoughtful depictions of "real"—in White's sense—

responses to the social, cultural, and historical milieu in which they exist. Furthermore, they evidence a text that ignores contemporary discussions of civil rights era race relations. Even as the text succeeds in pointing to the racial boundaries that separated women of different races and socio-economic groups, it does little to threaten them. Leaving such boundaries intact makes the text complicit in reinforcing racial stereotypes and privileging whiteness.

Instead of challenging a racial hierarchy that privileges whites and white narratives about the civil rights movement, *The Help* works to obscure the ugliness of race relations in the 1960's and seeks to forget the resentment and frustration that bubbled beneath of surface of the black women who cared for white families. Imagining that the racial turmoil happening on busses, in schools, and in the streets of Jackson did not permeate the homes and relationships of black domestics and white employers enables the text to operate in a world in which acknowledgment of racial strife masquerades as challenging racial hierarchies. In *The Help*, an overarching narrative in which black women and a white woman come together to reveal the stories of black maids only serves as a backdrop for reimagining white superiority and benevolence and black deference.

Conclusion

Philip M. Weinstein writes in his exploration of the black characters at the margins of Faulkner's texts, "We need to know what shaping images of blackness we are absorbing, what enabling or disabling traits are being passed on to us in its name" ("Marginalia" 171). *The Sound and the Fury*, *A Feast of Snakes*, and *The Help* each contribute different images, or traits, to popular conceptualizations of blackness. Though in his essay Weinstein argues that Faulkner's black characters are truncated, I have argued here for a more nuanced reading—not only of Dilsey and Luster but also of Lottie Mae, George, and Lummy as well as Aibileen and Minny. I have sought to acknowledge the racialized, restrictive, and retrogressive nature of representations of black domestic servants. However, I have also sought to point to moments in *The Sound and the Fury* and *A Feast of Snakes* that challenge the dominant white paradigms of the eras in which

the texts were set and written as well as moments in which black characters challenge both whites as oppressors and whiteness as it is represented in these texts. Though in *The Sound and the Fury* and *A Feast of Snakes* there are many images of blacks as oppressed, there are also images of blacks as strong, kind, smart, competent, successful, progressive, resourceful, and loving among other traits. And while these black characters remain marginal, equipped with these traits, they are set against the backdrop of dysfunctional white families, ultimately privileging black characters and culture.

Though Dilsey and Lottie Mae's families must, for the majority of the texts, bend to the demands of their white employers, they ultimately escape the relationships that bind them to mammy roles—Dilsey and her family outlast the Compsons and Lottie Mae kills Matlow and watches as the rest of the white community falls into insanity. The portrayals of black characters in *The Sound and the Fury* and *A Feast of Snakes* ultimately privilege blackness—the familial and intimate relationships, moral and ethical codes, and aptitudes and abilities of black characters—over whiteness. Though within the worlds of Yoknapatawpha County and Mystic, Georgia the black characters are certainly on the losing end of a real power differential between whites and blacks, both texts set up a compare-and-contrast relationship between whiteness and blackness and evidently favor blackness. This significant challenge to dominant, white, racist discourses popular throughout much—arguably all—of the twentieth century South works to reverse conceptualizations in which blacks are inferior and whites must, in some way, contend with them. Instead, in *The Sound and the Fury* and *A Feast of Snakes*, blacks are held up as the superior race to be emulated while whites are problems to be dealt with.

However, *The Help*, in very troubling ways, seeks to maintain racial stratification even as it masquerades as an empowering story of interracial cooperation. Like Dilsey and Lottie Mae and their families, Aibileen and Minny are subject to the demands of their white employers. Their roles as blacks and domestic servants affect their lives inside and outside the homes of the

whites for whom they care. *The Help*, like *The Sound and the Fury* and *A Feast of Snakes*, depicts the injustice of racialized power differentials, but the ways in which the text attempts—or does not attempt—a critique of white hegemony are very different. Aibileen and Minny do come to appear to be more morally upright than many of the text's white characters, and their participation in the publication of *Help* is certainly an act of resistance to the conditions of their labor and treatment by whites. However, aside from major plot points, the characterizations of Minny and Aibileen situate them as mammy figures. While at the close of *The Sound and the Fury* and *A Feast of Snakes*, the black characters thrive while white characters deteriorate, *The Help* depicts Skeeter escaping her oppression in Jackson while the black characters stay behind to remain in conditions little changed by the publication of *Help*. At the close of *The Help*, Aibileen's voice continues to be obscured as she writes in the voice of a white woman for a white newspaper. Minny has shifted at the novel's end from resisting the mammy role to becoming a lifelong employee of the Footes and companion to Celia.

Though *The Sound and the Fury* and *A Feast of Snakes* rely on privileging blackness as a device through which to challenge racial stratification, comparing whites to blacks is not requisite for a text seeking to do the same. However, *The Help*'s recasting of Aibileen and Minny into roles slightly different from but just as disempowered as those in which they began the text stands in stark contrast to the depictions of Dilsey and Lottie Mae and their families. Dilsey, Lottie Mae, and their families are often powerless within the context of the novels but stand as figures imbued with the power to achieve ascendancy over whites in myriad ways. Aibileen and Minny, however, lack the power to influence whites or change the conditions within which they live and work; though *Help* works toward this end, Minny and Aibileen's conditions remain largely unchanged. So, too, do they fail as symbols of the power of blacks to supersede whites. Though they represent the moral standard, competency, and compassion the white characters lack, they are unable to step outside of—even momentarily—roles beyond which they might use these traits to benefit themselves instead of the whites for whom they care. Their positions within Jackson

and within the tradition of domestic service and the mammy myth remain unchanged, rendering moot any challenge they or their depictions as morally superior to whites might pose to white hegemony. That *The Help* fails to challenge white hegemony as do *The Sound and the Fury* and *A Feast of Snakes* suggests an unwillingness to significantly challenge white hegemony and a retrogressive move in depictions of black domestic servants.

If Weinstein concerns about the effects of popular images of blackness are well founded, there is much to be concerned about. The film version of *The Help* did not win the Academy Award for Best Picture. Ironically, however, Octavia Spencer, the actress who plays Minny in the film, did win the award for Best Supporting Actress, the same award Hattie McDaniel won for her portrayal of Scarlett O'Hara's mammy in *Gone with the Wind*. That both the text and the movie were well received and that Octavia Spencer was praised for playing the same role Hattie McDaniel played in 1939 are cause for concern. The ways in which black characters are depicted in works of fiction and the ways in which those characters are reacted to by black and white audiences alike are perhaps the most honest metrics we have for gauging race relations in the United States. If such is true, the ways in which *The Help* fails at challenging white hegemony, while texts written decades before largely succeed, are troubling.

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