

Framing the Past

The Help and *Mad Men* as Posthistory

“Let’s face it, mother: Annie’s always been more like a real mother to me—you never had time for me.”

—Sandra Dee to Lana Turner (*Imitation of Life*, 1959)

In the introduction I suggest that despite their differences, postfeminism and postracism share a code of representation in which the “post” frames the histories of feminism and race, giving boundaries and linear perspective to concepts that are multiple in their historical construction. Through this narrow frame, feminist and antiracist struggles are historicized as therapeutic sites against which to measure the happiness of the present.¹ These codes of representation create a sense of familiarity and authenticity by reworking popular images of the past that already have affective meaning for contemporary audiences. The frame of representation itself disappears as history becomes a series of events understood according to their contemporary emotional registers.

President Obama’s 2008 speech, “A More Perfect Union,” is a key example of some of the elements of this postracial discursive ordering of history. This speech—given in response to increasing criticism of his relationship with the Rev. Jeremiah Wright—is seen as a defining moment in his campaign for the presidency. In *The Persistence of the Color Line*, Randall Kennedy identifies two of the speech’s rhetorical strategies designed to appeal to white voters in particular and to demonstrate Obama’s ability to be universally representative in office. First,

Kennedy notes Obama's careful use of the passive voice in discussing the history of racist oppression in the United States:

[Even] the speech's most direct engagement with racial oppression is suffused with a passive voice that obscures the participation of whites, past and present, in the making, perpetuation, and exploitation of racial subordination. Obama stated that "blacks were prevented . . . from owning property," that "loans were not granted to African-American business owners," and that "blacks were excluded from unions." But who have been the perpetrators and beneficiaries of those awful injustices? In Obama's chronicle whites are strangely absent from those roles. (107-08)

The second salient point that Kennedy makes about the speech is that Obama engages in false equivalency. Kennedy understands the speech as "equating the racial wrongs of whites and blacks. At each and every point at which Obama mentions failure or misconduct attributable to whites, he hastens to mention a corresponding failure or misconduct attributable to blacks" (120). This version of history serves to reaffirm rather than challenge the "white racial frame" through which U.S. history is normatively represented in popular culture.² Moreover, Obama presents the struggles of the previous generation as understandable but located in the distant past; his own success represents the generational gap between himself and the civil rights generation of Wright.³

At stake in the criticism of Wright is not merely the question of black anger at whites, but also Wright's—and thus by extension Obama's—understanding of American history and his ability to tell the story of the United States within the white racial frame. Obama's ability to place Wright within a generational narrative that locates the candidate at a sympathetic distance from the oppression and alienating affective states of anger and resentment transformed him into a marker of postracial America. Moreover, Obama fits his story into the demands of the "triumphalist narrative" of U.S. history that has been the dominant framework for telling the nation's story.⁴

Popular postfeminist texts generally share these strategies of historical ordering and are generally similarly effective. In both discourses, historical struggle gives way to a therapeutic need to focus attention back on the project of self-making.⁵ The "post" attached to feminism

and race not only marks as past feminism and race, but also gives meaning to the struggles of the past, ordering the past into a clear, singular explanation of how we arrived in a “post” culture and giving ideological content to its overall difference from that past. As a popular discourse, postfeminism offers the cultural capital of an ideal femininity, guaranteeing that it is pleasure, opportunity, and freedom we have inherited from the past by placing the alienating affects associated with injustice at a distance.

Moreover, these post-discourses emerged into a cultural field of power relations dominated by Francis Fukuyama’s claim that we have reached the “end of history.” There has been much criticism of his argument, but his claim is informed by the proliferation of “posts” that circulate in U.S. culture. If, as Fukuyama argues, the “end of history” is found in the ideal modern liberal-capitalist state and the end of ideological struggle, then the “post” is the stamp of victorious closure on social justice struggles. Posthistory, then, is not a sign of the abandonment of history, but instead acts as an engineering system that manages our structural relations with the past. As Samuel Cohen argues in his analysis of Eugenides’s *Middlesex*, posthistorical discourse orders history so that the ending we have now (our society today) is the legitimate and inevitable “happy ending” or, at least, the happiest that is available to us (385). As Obama’s speech suggests, this triumphant closure implies that history itself seems to be oppressive, that it is what must be overcome through the assimilation of ideological differences and a therapeutic enactment of the past’s happy endings. Post-discourse frames the past in such a way that the social order of today is the legitimate and inevitable outcome of the ideological struggles of the past. More important, our ability to recognize those struggles as past is a clear and necessary mark of our own well-being and acceptance into this social order and, thus, what can and cannot be changed about the society we live in.

Obama’s speech carefully places racial oppression and the struggle against it within a narrative of generational change. While the majority of political commentators praised Obama’s speech as “candid” and “brave,” Kennedy argues that Obama’s speech made little intellectual contribution to the national conversation on race, pointing out that he merely tells us facts available to any student of U.S. history, repeating back to us as it were the history we (should) already know (119–20). What’s important for a white audience, however, as Kennedy notes,

is the therapeutic gain it achieves from reliving that history from the perspective of an “authentic” Other and being authorized to move past it, while also being assured that Obama too understands the importance of moving past it.

In this chapter, I examine the complex ways in which post-discourse works to order histories of gender and race so that this ordering becomes the cultural logic through which we come to address not only contemporary social and political problems, but also are able to incorporate historical injustice into the dominant affective national narrative. I examine two texts that have been praised, like Obama’s speech, for their realism and authenticity in their successful incorporation of race and gender inequality into entertaining historical fictions: the best-selling novel and hugely successful film *The Help* and AMC’s popular series *Mad Men*. Both are complex examples of post-discourse that are successful because of their affective management of the distance between past and present, bringing narrative coherence to both. Few critics have noted that each text gets to have it both ways: to authenticate its historicization of the injustices of the 1960s without undermining white male authority as legitimate in the past and today. This ordering of the past inevitability leads to a maintenance of the contemporary social order. However, I argue that in addition to sharing these features, as post-9/11 texts they also share an anxiety about their ordering of history. Finally, I analyze these texts to demonstrate how those who refuse to join in this collective feeling become what Sara Ahmed has called “affect aliens”—those who do not partake in the invitation to “share” in therapeutic stories of the past in order to shed the negative affect associated with inequality and social injustice. Instead, such triumphalist narratives move the possibility of critique further to the margins of the dominant culture.

As noted earlier, at the end of the Cold War some cultural critics claimed “the end of history,” meaning the end of ideological struggle and the proliferation of post-discourses (the postmodern, the postcolonial, the postfeminist, and postracial); however, many theorists identify these not as historical moments, but as discursive historical constructions. Theorists who study the postmodern and postcolonial frequently discuss the significance of history in these texts. If one looks at contemporary culture, one might say that the proliferation of “posts” in our culture speaks to our deep concern with history at the beginning of the twenty-first century: from postmodern and postcolonial novels to more popular

forms of culture. This suggests a continuing deep investment in thinking the relation between the present moment and our most recent pasts or in ordering that past to lend legitimacy to the current social order.

This is true of Obama's "A More Perfect Union" speech in which he orders history within a white liberal racial frame so that he can address the particular "problem" of his relationship with Rev. Wright, but more significantly, the idea for many whites that he *must* address this relationship. Similarly, while many of the canonical media texts of postfeminism appear ahistorical in their relentless focus on contemporary white femininity, critics have noted these texts' concern with temporality, most often in relation to questions of age, which calls into being the generational situating of postfeminism as always already the text that speaks from the position of the present generation (the now) and not the past. Similar to Obama's generational framing of racial injustice, postfeminism frames injustice through a generational lens that places feminist struggle and the difficulties women experience, particularly women of color and white working-class and poor women, at an affective distance. However, as Angela McRobbie first pointed out, most postfeminist texts must "take into account" that past in order to demonstrate their own "knowing" contemporaneousness and futurity (1–18).

Historical fictions explicitly engage in this time management. Harry E. Shaw, in "Is There a Problem with Historical Fiction," argues that it is now considered a "truism" that historical fiction is more about the historical moment of its writing than about the past it represents. While Shaw's earlier work focused on what he terms "pastoral" historical fiction, fiction that "employ[s] a historical setting primarily as a screen on which to project present concern," his current work focuses on historical fiction that has a more complex relation with the past: in which history becomes a way of "representing the dynamics of the past and exploring its relationship to the present" (176). Feminists, too, in varying ways have always been interested in "looking back" to explore the dynamic between past and present. Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn in "Hystorical Fictions: Women (Re)Writing and (Re)Reading History" state:

If one of the driving forces in the writing of historical fiction is to give a voice to the silenced Other, then for a woman or ethnic author to write into being the unaddressed past and its

mutated subalterns, or to rewrite an established male-authored work, presents a challenge for both author and reader. When Toni Morrison wrote *Beloved* she was reclaiming an experience that had hitherto been written and documented largely by white men or “official” history. In giving the protagonists of the story, especially the women, a voice, Morrison was using the evidence provided by a partial and partisan history even as she undermined its right of narrative and cultural supremacy. (142)

Joan Scott argues that for feminist historians “the point of looking to the past was to destabilize the present, to challenge patriarchal institutions and ways of thinking that legitimated themselves as natural, to make the unthinkable thought (to detach gender from sex, for example)” (21). As the generation now characterized as the second wave has achieved institutional and cultural authority and women’s and gender studies has become institutionalized and established as one of many interdisciplinary fields of study, so too has the effort to historicize feminist struggle become a matter of greater interest for feminists, particularly, I argue, as popular culture has so easily taken control of the metanarrative of the feminist past and incorporated these narrative elements into multiple media genres.

Misha Kavka, in “Feminism, Ethics, and History,” argues that the very multiplicity of feminism:

ha[s] given rise to [this] *search for origins*, to attempts to write a history of second-wave feminism that will “stick.” Our moment in feminist history, in fact, can be characterized by the struggle to figure out the present situation—often articulated as a concern about whether there is still such a thing called “feminism”—by writing the past. It is here that the meaning of “post” as a historical break with the past is peculiarly compelling and troubling, for “post” offers to situate feminism in history by proclaiming the end of this history. It thus confirms feminist history as an effect of retrospection, as something that we know to have existed because we can now say it no longer does. (my italics; 30)

Kavka raises several points here that are importantly linked in *The Help*'s representation of race and gender through a retrospective lens. Both Kavka and Scott, in assessing the struggle to narrativize feminist history, argue that the "affective grip" of postfeminism lies partly in its version of the past as the time when a collective identity (we, women) was possible and even essential to feminine identity (Kavka 32). Writing a history of feminism poses ethical problems for both Kavka and Scott because:

such an endeavor . . . takes the form of how to think the function of ethics within a movement that is both political and personal. The problem for feminist histories of feminism, from the point of view of the present, is the tendency to understand feminism as an individual prerogative, measuring the advance of the movement by the degree that individuals act as "feminists," that is, act in an ethical manner. (Kavka 38)

Kavka calls this the "personalizing of ethics," which is "in turn linked to a linear or progressive history of advancement, where what advances is a 'cause' understood as being singular and individually invested" (38).

Similarly Scott understands the popular metanarrative of feminism that has taken hold: "Stories designed to celebrate women's agency began to seem predictable and repetitious, more information garnered to prove a point that had already been made" (22). She argues that feminist historicism must resist such narrative repetition and "historicize the present's fundamental truths and expose the kinds of investments that drive them, in this way using the past not as the precursor to what is . . . but as its foil" (25). Scott's commitment to a historicized present is aligned with the feminist project of denaturalizing the inevitability of hierarchy and its "relentless interrogation of the taken-for-granted" and at odds, I argue, with postfeminism's endless repetitive framing of particular stories and particular heroines (23).

For Scott and Kavka the strength of feminism lies in its multiplicity and its critique of "its own essentialist narratives" (Scott 21). The "post" in postfeminism, then, might reflect a desire to foreclose this multiplicity of narratives of coming to feminism, forestalling the complexity of coming of age, and returning, really, to what appears to be a simpler past—to both have that "simple" past as it never was and

to overcome that past without experiencing the public conflicts that attend feminism. In other words, the “post” is not the poststructuralism of historians who delegitimize the gender essentialism of the present by deconstructing the dominant ideologies of the past that structure gendered “choices” today.

In fact, it was an emotional need for reassurance and security that motivated Stockett to write *The Help*. The need for feminism in the past is incorporated into (“taken into account”) Stockett’s novel, but this feminist coming-of-age tale works not to develop the multiplicity of originary narratives of feminist and antiracist struggle in U.S. history, but to repeat a (his)story we already know so that readers can move past it and feel secure in contemporary normative white femininity. Not surprisingly, then, many contemporary readers and filmgoers find *The Help*’s woman-centered story of agency and collective consciousness-raising to have an “affective grip.”

Moreover, this “affective grip” is overdetermined by the post-9/11 need to resurrect the triumphalist narrative. By focusing on “moral” struggles that U.S. citizens appear to have overcome, leading to that “more perfect union” that Obama discusses in his campaign speech, the narrative can be reasserted. Samuel Cohen sees this return to the triumphalist narrative as characteristic of even U.S. postmodern novels that generally approach evolutionary narratives of history with suspicion. He argues that *Middlesex* represents the post-9/11 historical novel because it creates closure by refusing to narrate those disastrous historical events at the close of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century that undermine the triumphalist narrative; instead Eugenides offers the reader a version of the past that promises therapeutic reassurance against any present anxieties caused by 9/11. In this sense, the discursive order of the post-9/11 narrative is to reaffirm the “end of history” in the face of a collective trauma that throws into question the sense of identity and belonging offered by triumphalism. *The Help* in popular fashion clearly supports Cohen’s argument, establishing its affective grip through what I argue are dominant strategies of postfeminist/postracial history making in the twenty-first century.

According to Kathryn Stockett, she began writing *The Help* after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. In a 2009 *Time* magazine interview, she recalls:

I started writing it the day after Sept. 11. I was living in New York City. We didn’t have any phone service and we didn’t

have any mail. Like a lot of writers do, I started to write in a voice that I missed. I was really homesick—I couldn't even call my family and tell them I was fine. So I started writing in the voice of Demetrie, the maid I had growing up. She later became the character of Aibileen [in *The Help*].

Like many Americans after 9/11, Stockett seems to have been awakened from a particular kind of presentism and, like many who experience trauma, she turned to thoughts of home, desiring to close the distance—geographic, temporal, and affective—between her isolated conditions in New York and her family life in the South. Her longing for this past emerges from just the sort of anxiety that Samuel Cohen sees as particular to the post-9/11 novel and that Kavka and Scott see as nostalgia for a collective femininity in postfeminist discourse.

Stockett manages the trauma of 9/11 by imagining that past as embodied, not surprisingly, in maternal nurturance and security. But what she finds there is absence and a new anxiety about the sources of her own goodness and well-being. This anxiety is clearly reflected in the novel when the young white heroine Skeeter returns home from college to find “my” Constantine has left the family without telling her: “By September . . . I gave up on ever finding Constantine. No one seemed to know a thing or how I could reach her. I finally stopped asking people why Constantine had left. It was like she'd simply disappeared. I had to accept that Constantine, my one true ally, had left me to fend for myself with these people” (81). Skeeter does not give up. The desire to know what happened to Constantine leads to Skeeter's relationship with Aibileen who has also suffered a loss, the death of her son Trelore. These deaths—of the young black male and the original black “mother”—make possible Skeeter and Aibileen's relationship and ultimately their freedom from the constraints the race and gender hierarchy of the South place on them.

In the afterword, “Too Little, Too Late,” Stockett does not mention 9/11 as a catalyst for the novel, but begins with a story about Demetrie and the security of identity that Demetrie represented for her as a child, skipping over the traumatic sense of loss that led her to “channel Demetrie's voice” in writing the novel: “‘This is where you belong. Here with me,’ [Demetrie] said, and patted my hot leg. Her hands were always cool. I watched the older kids play cards, not caring as much that Mother was away again. I was where I belonged . . .”

(527). Indeed, Stockett tells us that her novel is fiction and is not set in the era of her own youth, but a decade prior to her birth. However, she also tells us that the process of writing the novel was a process of remembering: “I wrote *The Help* while living in New York, which I think was easier than writing it in Mississippi, staring in the face of it all. The distance added perspective. In the middle of a whirring, fast city, it was a relief to let my thoughts turn slow and remember for a while . . .” (528). Instead of discussing the event that made her think of Demetrie and Demetrie’s life, Stockett writes:

I’m pretty sure I can say that no one in my family ever asked Demetrie what it felt like to be black in Mississippi, working for our white family. It never occurred to us to ask. It was everyday life. It wasn’t something people felt compelled to examine. I have wished for many years, that I’d been old enough and thoughtful enough to ask Demetrie that question. She died when I was sixteen. I’ve spent years imagining what her answer would be. And that is why I wrote this book. (530)

This anxiety about the security of selfhood, of perhaps *not belonging*, of being not innocently outside of historical trauma but part of it, is decidedly suppressed through Stockett’s own remembering: the anxiety that the past, and thus, the present, could be other than it is is elided by inventing a past that validates the present self. Moreover, in case readers were tempted to question Stockett’s imagining of black women’s lives in 1960s Mississippi as a means of securing her own sense of identity, Stockett tells readers the theme of the novel: “In *The Help* there is one line that I truly prize: ‘Wasn’t that the point of the book? For women to realize, we are just two people. Not that much separates us. Not nearly as much as I’d thought’” (530).

Two kinds of temporal management occur in the novel. First, the trauma of 9/11 causes Stockett to *belatedly* recognize the personal and collective trauma of racial oppression that her family did not recognize as such. It makes sense that Stockett would want to tell the story of this traumatic history and that she would connect the terrorism of white supremacy to the terrorism of 9/11. Irene Kacandes, in “The Changed Posttraumatic Self” argues, “Being able to move on from th[e] threat to the self involves in part accepting the fact that what seemed impossible did actually happen by telling a narrative about it and feeling the

appropriate affect for such an occurrence” (171). This demonstrates the essential therapeutic qualities of the novel for Stockett, except the trauma that Stockett is writing about and exorcising is not the trauma of racist oppression, but the trauma of her belated recognition of the reality of her relationship with Demetrie.

Second, her use of the civil rights movement as a setting for the story seems an attempt to manage that belatedness. Through this temporal displacement, Stockett further shuts the door between her own anxiety about her ignorance of Demetrie’s life, managing the present by working to imagine not just Demetrie’s life, but to fill in a historical gap: she chose to set her novel in the middle of the civil rights era to fill in what she saw as a gap in women’s civil rights history. In “Celebrating the Girls of Summer,” Frank Bruni states, “The book’s author, Kathryn Stockett, told me that she felt that most civil rights literature had taken a male perspective, leaving ‘territory that hadn’t been covered much.’” She also tells him, “I’m really only interested in writing about women.” Thus, Stockett places the novel firmly within the context of the feminist novel that tells history “against the grain of familiar paradigms” (Shaw 177).

Situating the novel during the civil rights era leads to the expectation that the novel will reenvision that movement from the perspective of the women in that movement, but the civil rights struggles of the era take place as a backdrop to most of the events in the text and the major black characters even joke about local church leaders who openly engage in its politics. While Medgar Evers’s death is a significant happening in the text, female civil rights activists are barely mentioned. Myrlie Evers is referred to twice in the novel. Given what readers learn in the afterword, I think it is fair to ask why Stockett did not set the novel during the era of her own childhood, during the final decades of the Cold War. Why not a novel about white racial privilege set within the context of post-9/11 New York? Why not a coming-of-age novel set in the Carter–Reagan years of her youth? Why the historical displacement of her “imagining” of “a relationship that was so intensely influential in my life, so loving, so grossly stereotyped in American history and literature” (Stockett 529)?

These multiple sets of intentions help us understand how “post” discourse operates to place at a distance the negative affect associated with Stockett’s personal story, a story of innocence/ignorance that seems out of time and place in the twenty-first century. Stockett experiences

homesickness for *home* and for the *past*, but the past she sees when she looks back does not fit within the white racial frame that specifies her own virtue.⁶ Her nostalgia results in new, confused questions, leading to feelings of shame. She tells Katie Couric that the first time she began to ask questions about Demetrie's life outside of her work for Stockett's family was after 9/11: "I feel a little ashamed to admit . . . it was not until I was 30 nearly 35 that I really began to question and think about for the first time in my life what Demetrie must have been thinking and feeling as she was taking care of our family." In other words, there is a conflict between the author's desire to seek comfort in the love of Demetri and the anxiety caused by the absence of Demetri's thoughts and feelings from the home.⁷

Stockett displaces this shame by setting the story at a remove from her own generation and removing feminism from the text. The shame, then, like the resentment and anger Obama discusses in his speech, is safely located in generations past and Skeeter's coming-of-age in parallel with the civil rights movement helps readers move therapeutically past this shame by telling it through framing devices that ensure whites will find it reassuringly familiar and healing because it both appears not only to right a historical wrong but also to assure readers that that historical wrong has already been healed; they, therefore, like the characters in the novel, are free to move past it. In fact, Stockett seems to intimate a double intention in the desire to imagine Demetrie's answer to the question she never asked: On the one hand, she writes the book because she has spent years imagining what Demetrie's answer would be, but she also states that her fear about writing from black women's perspectives was less than her fear that there was "so much more love between white families and black domestics than I had the ink or time to portray" (529). In this instance, then, Stockett does not need Demetrie to answer. As she states in her interview with Couric: "I know Demetrie loved me because she told me so. And Demetrie didn't lie." In turning to Demetrie after the trauma of 9/11, Stockett does not imagine Demetrie as more complex than she remembers her, but rather reaffirms for herself and her contemporary readers a story they already know.

Stockett weds the cultural and personal trauma of 9/11 to a historical moment when terror was internal and that terror was overcome; but the trauma of losing Demetrie/Constantine that is raised in Stockett's origin story of the novel and within the novel itself places the legitimacy of the contemporary postfeminist and postracial self in jeopardy. The *lack* of dif-

ference between past and present creates an anxiety, a tension: the self of Skeeter coming of age in the early 1960s and Katherine Stockett belatedly coming of age at the beginning of the twenty-first century. What makes this repetition possible and even appealing for contemporary readers?

This historical fiction relies on the popular images of the past, including the image of normative white 1950s femininity and the stereotypes of the mammy and the angry black woman. As Harriet Pollack notes in her analysis of Bobbie Ann Mason's self-conscious use of media images to represent history: "Popular culture's historical narrative[s] . . . seem reliable in therapeutic and releasing ways. They make horror over into manageable entertainment, shared and consumed with interest by a nation in need of narrative's power to release and then contain shock, and even transform it into comedy. But they are unreliable in other ways" (101). Stockett is able to circulate negating stock figures from the past to manage the anxiety of *belatedness* ("Too Little, Too Late") that places the security, the knowingness of the present into question. Stockett appropriates the politics of the civil rights movement into a story that is both a young white woman's coming-of-age story and an intergenerational maternal drama. And she uses the ahistorical rhetoric of "firstness" to explicitly situate her story within antiracist and feminist revisioning of history: the relation between black domestic workers and their white employers or, in the second historical sense, the contributions of black and white women to the civil rights era (the domestic, personal meaning of integration). In both cases, where Stockett sees absence, the historian sees repetition. The Association of Black Women Historians argues in a statement critiquing *The Help's* representation of domestic workers that the novel "uses myths about the lives of black women to make sense of [the white protagonist's] own. The Association finds it unacceptable for either this book or the film to strip black women's lives of historical accuracy for the sake of entertainment." The historians note that the book was specifically marketed as a "progressive story of triumph over racial injustice" and will be more widely circulated than most historical accounts from scholars.

The novel appropriates the familiar stereotypes of popular images from history in several ways to give a familiar affect to *The Help*, while placing it firmly within a specific Southern literary tradition. The publishers and reviewers—and the novel itself—are insistent on the connection between *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *The Help*. The paperback cover of my copy includes a quote from NPR: "This could be one of

the most important pieces of fiction since *To Kill a Mockingbird*. . . . If you read only one book . . . let this be it." We are encouraged to see Skeeter as an older, more agentic version of Scout and to place the novel within that Southern white literary history in which the white child's moral development is measured by her awareness of the color-line and her recognition of its injustice.⁸ Skeeter's lack of knowledge, her innocence and ignorance about racial segregation, and her apathy toward the civil rights movement are explained by her race, class, and gender position within that same society. These factors and her age, in contrast with the black domestic workers in the novel, make her an unreliable narrator, but in the end it is her perspective that the novel validates. Skeeter's coming of age is seen as white America's coming of age as she becomes wrapped up in the popular contemporary symbols of the 1960s such as Bob Dylan's music and miniskirts. Skeeter becomes not a symbol of Stockett's belatedness, but a symbol of America's "more perfect" future.

On the other hand, Stockett takes care to try and distance the novel from Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* by having Skeeter reference the novel in her conversation with the New York publisher Missus Stein: "I'd like to write this showing the point of view of the help. . . . It's that irony, that we love them and they love us, yet . . . 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'" (123).⁹ There are other literary texts and films referenced throughout the novel. However, there are no references to another text that would have been familiar to most of the characters in the novel: Douglas Sirk's hugely successful 1959 adaptation of *Imitation of Life*. This maternal melodrama tells the story of two generations of women: an ambitious white mother and her neglected daughter, and Annie, their self-sacrificing black housekeeper and her troubled daughter Sarah Jane. The film seems one of the most relevant popular texts contemporaneous to the events of the novel. Stockett's novel has lines that are nearly identical to those in *Imitation of Life*, especially in its Aibileen and Skeeter sections. In *Imitation of Life*, Susie tells her own ambitious actress mother: "Let's face it, mother: Annie's always been more like a real mother to me—you never had time for me." The most emotional moments in the novel (and certainly in the film version) come from Mae Mobley's insistence that Aibileen is her real mother and Aibileen's desire to raise

Mae Mobley to not “see color.” The most melodramatic of these scenes is when Aibileen is fired and must say goodbye to Mae Mobley:

“Baby Girl,” I say. “I need you to remember everthing I told you. Do you remember what I told you?” . . . I look deep into her rich brown eyes and she look into mine. Law, she got old-soul eyes, like she done lived a thousand years. And I swear I see, down inside, the woman she gone grow up to be. A flash from the future. She is tall and straight. She is proud. She got a better haircut. And she is *remembering* the words I put in her head. Remembering as a full-grown woman.

And then she say it, just like I need her to. “You is kind,” she say, “you is smart. You is important.” “Oh, *Law*.” I hug her hot little body to me. I feel like she done just given me a gift. (520–21)

If the reciprocal love between white daughter and black mother were only established in this relationship, the novel might be seen as emphasizing Aibileen’s displacement of her own love for her dead son Treelore onto Mae Mobley. However, the Aibileen/Mae Mobley story closely parallels Skeeter’s own relationship with Constantine; Skeeter’s sense of being left to fend for herself with “these people” dramatizes the inarticulate Mae Mobley’s feelings about Aibileen’s leaving and Mae Mobley’s tears at losing “her Aby” enact Skeeter’s own sense of loss. This extravagant, repeated tribute to black domestic workers as mothers to white children undermines Skeeter’s repudiation of Margaret Mitchell, but to many readers it seems to authenticate the perspectives of the novel as being a realistic reenvisioning of the mammy stereotype because it recognizes the racism of white female employers.

Skeeter may be aware of the mammy stereotype, but she seems less clear about her own participation in its reproduction. Moreover, Stockett includes the story of Constantine giving up her daughter, Lulubelle, for adoption because of Lulubelle’s white skin. This story is also similar to *Imitation of Life* in which the light-skinned daughter Sarah Jane abandons her mother to live as white. In fact, in the novel, Lulubelle’s passing for white at Skeeter’s mother’s DAR meeting and Mrs. Phelan’s insistence that Lulubelle hide in the kitchen is the catalyst for Constantine’s departure and Skeeter’s loss. Key to the characterization of Constantine and Aibileen is their transfer of their love for their own

child—taken from them by “whiteness”—to their employers’ children. Constantine and Aibileen are at particular pains to develop the self-esteem of Skeeter and Mae Mobley, demonstrating a concern for the white girls’ feelings that they do not show toward any of the black girls or young women in the novel who are mostly absent from the multiple stories that populate the text. The only young female character—black or white—who has importance for any of the black female characters is Skeeter. Adding to this sense of memorialization is the fact that Constantine, like Annie in *Imitation of Life* and Demetrie in Stockett’s life, cannot just have moved to Chicago with her own daughter; she must die there alone in order to forward the young white girl’s moral development: “I think about Constantine, after living fifty years in the country, sitting in a tiny apartment in Chicago. How lonely she must have felt. How bad her knees must’ve felt in that cold. . . . When did she die? How long was she living in Chicago? I ask. . . . Her mother answers: ‘Three weeks’” (429–30). The “matricide” of Constantine is similar to the death of Demetrie: only young white women inherit the knowledge and love that each has to offer and we must be satisfied—although it be “too little, too late”—with the voice that Stockett chooses to give each of them.

In her 1994 article, “The Occult of True Black Womanhood: Critical Demeanor and Black Feminist Studies,” Ann duCille argues that these images are part of a larger obsession with the black woman as metaphor for white women’s morality. DuCille does not place this consumption of black women’s texts within the frame of postracialism and postfeminism, but I argue that her article identifies one of the elements of both discourses in their appropriation and resignification of commodified, stereotypical images of black women. DuCille argues:

The child may be father of the man in poetry, but frequently when white scholars reminisce about blacks from their past it is black mammy . . . who mothers the ignorant white infant into “enlightenment.” Often as the youthful, sometimes guilty witness to or cause of the silent martyrdom of the older Other, the privileged white person inherits a wisdom, an agelessness, perhaps even a racelessness that entitles him or her to the raw materials of another’s life and culture but, of course, not to the Other’s condition. Such transformative moves often occur in the forewords, afterwords, rationales, even apologies

white scholars affix to their would-be scholarly readings of the Other. (84)

Stockett's afterword repeats the pattern of white writers who write about black subjects by including a confessional about how consciousness of racism has affected her. These confessionals are part of much less popularly known feminist struggles, but Stockett elides this difficult political history in her displacement and substitution of feminist politics for an intergenerational maternal melodrama in which the text works to position Aibileen as the ideal maternal model. In doing so, Stockett stakes a claim for Skeeter/herself as the inheritor not only of the material and social privileges of whiteness, but also the symbolic capital of affection, knowledge, and support that Aibileen and Minny have to offer. Stockett imagines herself—imagines Skeeter—not as the inheritor of civil rights and feminist struggles (including the sexism and racism in those movements) but of ideal maternal goodness that assures all the Mae Mobeys that they are “good,” “smart,” and “important.”

This appropriation of intergenerational maternal melodrama elides the political struggles against institutionalized social and economic disparities and the realities of structural privilege, and it has an interesting parallel in the feminist movement itself where metaphors of second-wave mothers and third-wave daughters have been used to describe Stockett's generation's rebellion against the media-driven portraits of second-wave feminism. As Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra argue, many postfeminist texts “emphasize the failure of cross-generational understanding between mothers and daughters, or dismiss the possibility of such understanding in favor of caricature. . . . Mothers (biological or symbolic) are impediments to a younger woman [sic] or girl's self-discovery” (“In Focus” 109). Skeeter's rebellion against her own antifeminist mother is instructive, then, in thinking about how damaging this metaphorical substitution of adolescent rebellion for feminist ideological struggle is: the symbolic mothers of *The Help* absent the power of the white mother present no impediment to the self-discovery of the white postfeminist heroine, serving instead as sources of capital for the self. In the end, Skeeter upholds the racial power structure she appears to reject.

Skeeter's rebellion is primarily a rebellion against her mother and she asserts her independence mostly through rebellion in practices of consumption and dress; she desires to be a writer, but this does not motivate her toward feminist consciousness. Similarly, the biggest threat

to Mae Mobley's sense of self is her mother, Elizabeth. Thus, the rebellion in the novel is a rebellion against normative white femininity, particularly a rebellion against the white mother, not a rebellion *against racist patriarchy*.

As many critics of the novel have pointed out, the black women in the text fear white women much more so than they fear white men.¹⁰ And the biggest threat to Minny is not Johnny the white man, but is "queen bee" Hilly and Minny's abusive husband, Leroy. Although Hilly is the villain of the book, readers see that in order to be "free" Minny must learn that the "lines" that divide her from her white employer, Celia, and her husband, Johnny, are "imaginary." By the end of her story, she comes to understand how much she has compared to Celia who cannot have the child that she desires: "And I wonder how it is that I have so much when she doesn't have any. He's crying. She's crying. We are three fools in the dining room crying" (476). Readers understand that Minny's tears come as a breakthrough because she is breaking one of *her mother's* rules about working in a white household: she has come to care about the white woman she works for. This counternarrative to the story of Aibileen and Skeeter is an important one in the text. This character development is so important that a question about it is included in the Readers' Guide that accompanies the paperback version of the novel: "Do you believe that Minny was justified in her distrust of white people?" (534). Here we see how discussion of the "lines" between people becomes a strategy of false equivalency, where readers are encouraged to interrogate the ethics of Minny's feelings along with Hilly's. And, in fact, Aibileen suggests that Minny and Hilly suffer from the same "delusion" that the line between white and black is real. This strategy, in which we see Minny's moral development through her relationships with Skeeter and Celia, is explicitly coded as a recuperation of Minny from the "angry black woman" and into an acceptable mother figure for Skeeter, willing to care about and nurture Skeeter alongside Aibileen. Not only does Stockett repeat this familiar popular paradigm, but she also creates closure for the novel by providing us with an afterword that clearly affirms this as the lesson to take away from the novel.

At the end of the novel, we do not need Constantine "in the flesh," because we have her story through Skeeter and because Aibileen and Minny have replaced Constantine as the good mothers of the text, helping Skeeter develop the strength to leave home and take the

publishing job offered to her in New York. She tells Aibileen about the job even though she says she does not intend to take it. Aibileen assures her that it would be a waste for her to stay in Jackson out of concern for her and Minny: “‘Miss Skeeter, you got to take that job. . . . I don’t mean to be rubbing no salt on your wound but . . . you ain’t got a good life here in Jackson.’ . . . Suddenly it’s Minny on the phone. ‘You listen to me, Miss Skeeter. . . . don’t walk your white butt to New York, *run it*’” (499). This sense of closure through the reaffirmation of familial ties between black and white is further established by the church members’—representative of the black community in the novel—extravagant gratitude to Skeeter and insistence that she is now family: “[The Reverend] lays his hand on it as a blessing. ‘This one, this is for the white lady. You tell her we love her, like she’s our own family’” (467–68). This ending ensures that the novel heals the open wounds of traumatic loss Constantine’s absence caused by offering Skeeter several mothers who validate her desires: the good black mother and the angry, reformed black woman have both been recovered from the past by Skeeter. Skeeter’s mothers proliferate but they can never have the significance that she has because they can never have the mobility. Constantine’s move to the North to be with her own daughter—her choosing of her own daughter—results in her death; she can have no story beyond the story set in the South that is connected to *raising* Skeeter. Meanwhile Skeeter discovers a family that offers her the acceptance she rarely finds from her own mother—and a symbolic capital that she is able to use to secure her career in New York.¹¹

It is important for the novel that the “sisterhood” that some critics have celebrated is a cross-race intergenerational mother-daughter relationship. Her marital status, youth, and economic position mean that she rarely has to confront the realities of household labor. In fact, when Skeeter is hired to write Miss Myrna’s domestic help column, she knows she does not intend to learn to clean, but she also does not intend to hire someone to help her with the work. Instead, she “borrows” Aibileen from Elizabeth. As her mother comments to her, she has never had to hire “help,” but she has always benefited from the race and class privilege that ensures she can devote her days to writing. The novel refuses to address the central dilemma that confronts Skeeter: how to imagine gender autonomy that is not leveraged into being through race and class privilege. Stockett does not imagine feminist agency that is not secured through the economic structures of racial privilege nor do any of the

characters show an awareness of this reality.¹² While there are references to the low pay and poor working conditions of domestic work and an emphasis on the lack of alternatives for black women in Mississippi as well as on the money that everyone earns from participating in the writing of the book, these limited discussions cannot compensate for the book's refusal to understand the enormous economic inheritance that whites such as Skeeter's cotton farming family and Johnny's old money family reap from systemic racism. Skeeter's few stories of her father who owns a 10,000-acre cotton plantation place him firmly in the tradition of Atticus Finch. Stockett represents her father as a conscientious and hard-working farmer with little awareness of the social norms of the Jackson middle classes, but he is no less paternalistic than the other white male figures in the novel:

“I’ve got twenty-five Negroes working my fields and if anyone so much as laid a hand on them, or any of their families. . . .” Daddy’s gaze is steady. Then he drops his eyes. “I’m ashamed, sometimes, Senator. Ashamed of what goes on in Mississippi.” Mother’s eyes are big, set on Daddy. I am shocked to hear this opinion. . . . I’m suddenly so proud of my daddy, for many reasons. (316)

Skeeter has inherited the benefits of this system; she has a “cotton trust fund” that gives her material freedom in addition to the symbolic capital she acquires by writing the book and rebelling against the social norms that her friends seem all too eager to reproduce for their own children. In her interview with Stockett, Katie Couric describes Skeeter as “self-actualized” and “socially conscious,” while other reviewers describe her as “brave.” My point is that Skeeter is the inheritor of both worlds—not the young black men and women of the civil rights generation. While paying tribute to the black women who worked for white families in the South, Stockett makes Skeeter symbolically the complete field of Southern history. Stockett ignores the enormous cultural capital that she as a white author has and that Skeeter as a young white female coming-of-age character has in contemporary Hollywood. While this cultural capital does not transfer to structural power in media production, it is secured through the privileges of whiteness and youth. The articulation of this power is most visible in the film where young white,