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# Misreading Mammy: Towards a Sexual Revolution of Contemporary/Third Wave Black Feminisms

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UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

MISREADING MAMMY: TOWARDS A SEXUAL REVOLUTION OF  
CONTEMPORARY/THIRD WAVE BLACK FEMINISMS

By

Nicole Racquel Carr

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Faculty  
of the University of Miami  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Coral Gables, Florida

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REVOLUTION OF THIRD WAVE BLACK FEMINISMS

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Misreading Mammy: Towards a Sexual Revolution of  
Contemporary/Third Wave Black Feminisms

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This study considers Mammy as a disturbing presence within the plantation household due to the inherent sexual threat lodged within her body. Building on Black Feminist criticism and Whiteness Studies, this study treats Mammy as white supremacist trope silencing black women by recasting abusive white patriarchs and their complicit white wives as products of their time period and thus not fully accountable for exploiting and dominating enslaved black women. Although substantial critical attention has been paid to Mammy's position as surrogate mother and icon to an America nostalgic for the Old South, less attention has focused on Southern white women's fear of losing their position as wives to Mammy. This study begins by closely scrutinizing white women's antebellum journals as a means of conceptualizing Mammy as a decidedly sexual being. This project, then, explores white women's active role in black women's rape, sexual assault, and erasure. As pundits and politicians herald the emergence of a post-racial America, "Misreading Mammy" injects race back into the discussion by focusing a lens on enslaved black women's unique racial and sexual subjectivities.

## Dedication

For my mother:

Joyce Ann Carr

## Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I would like to thank my mentor and dissertation chair, David Ikard. I could not have completed this manuscript without his patient guidance. Fortunately, Dr. Ikard worked with me through every step of the writing process and helped me transform my idea into a full-fledged dissertation. I would also like to thank my committee members, Donette Francis and Patricia Saunders, for offering their critical expertise. Dr. Francis consistently pushed me to consider the larger implications of my project. I am also grateful for Sika Dagbovie-Mullins' keen insight.

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## Introduction

In 1981, my mother, like many other black women in the South, worked for a white family. When my mother recounts the terrifying details of the tense confrontation with her inebriated white male employer, my mind immediately catalogues the countless stories that I have read of black women's rape, near-rape, and sexual assault as black domestic workers. As early as 1912, Black women domestics bravely documented their white employer's attempts to sexually assault them. In the "Negro Nurse," an anonymous account of a black woman's experience working for a white family in Georgia, a former black domestic worker described the reason for her abrupt dismissal: "I refused to let the madam's husband kiss me" (qtd. in Sharpless 139). The set of unspoken rules black women developed for avoiding the unwelcome sexual advances of white men attests to black women's full awareness of the considerable dangers involved in entering these hostile white spaces. For black women domestics like Weida Edwards, guarding one's self against these sexual threats was merely a standard feature of the job: "You'd know how to run, or almost not be in the house with the white man or big sons" (qtd. in Sharpless 139). In spite of the defensive postures that black women assumed, black women domestics still found themselves ensnared within the crosshairs of white men's lascivious desire. The fear that Rosa Parks felt when the white man she worked for "moved nearer to me and put his hand on my waist" underscores black women's vulnerability within the private domestic sphere (Iinytzky, "Rosa Parks

Essay Reveals Rape Attempt”). My mother’s encounter with the inappropriate sexual advances of her white male employer is, sadly, an all-too common experience for black women working in white people’s homes.

There is, however, an element of my mother’s story that incriminates white women as active participants in black women’s sexual abuse. When the white couple returned home late from an evening out, my mother believed that they would quickly head upstairs. Instead the woman went upstairs, leaving my mother alone with her husband. Feeling her body stiffen with fear when the white man began approaching her, my mother began plotting her plans for escape: Could she get to the gold-encrusted fire poker above the fireplace in time? Could she hit him with enough force to knock him out? Long enough for her to dash into the next room and grab her sleeping baby—my eldest brother—in the next room? And, somewhere buried deep beneath my mother’s fright, there is another question: Why had the man’s wife left her alone with him? Nearly forty years later, my mother is grateful she did not have to resort to physical violence since the white man eventually relented, but she remains puzzled by the wife’s decision to leave her alone with her husband. “Why did she go upstairs? Did she know...?” My mother’s voice trails off but not before she says, “I felt set-up. Why would a wife leave her drunk husband with an eighteen-year-old girl downstairs late at night?” In fact, the middle-aged white woman, who frequently gave my mother her gently worn clothing and offered motherly advice, never returned downstairs to check in on my mother. While the white woman’s absence could be dismissed as mere coincidence or simple obliviousness, my mother’s inkling that she had been “set-up” by the both the white man and woman is consistent with other accounts from black domestic workers. In fact, this is the exact

reason that Black domestic worker Nancy White stops working for a white family, “I could see this young boy who was just able to pee straight making up his mind whether he was going to try me. I told the woman some lie and got my money and got out of there fast!” (qtd. in Sharpless 140). White’s account becomes even more troubling in light of her absolute certainty that the boy’s mother was fully aware of her child’s intentions but would not inhibit him from making good on his wishes because she “had spoiled that fool little boy of hers.” By exposing the mother’s role in her son’s potential sexual abuse, White encourages us to reconsider white women as co-conspirators colluding with white men to sexually assault and rape black women. Indeed, White’s decision to get “out of there fast!” is based on her shrewd understanding of the white woman’s complicity with her son and white male power which practically ensure that White’s claims will not be met with sympathy. My mother, too, refused to return to work in part because she feared the white man’s unchecked power but also because she understood that voicing her concerns to the man’s wife would most likely lead to an angry reprisal. Like the mother who willfully ignored her son’s obvious desire to rape White, my mother’s white female employer would most certainly go to great lengths to back her husband. The cost of this white woman’s protection would likely lead to her blaming my mother for seducing her husband. It is not far-fetched to suggest that this white woman would have then accused and persecuted my mother for stealing, thereby neutralizing my mother as a threat to her husband.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Haley, Sarah. *No Mercy Here: Gender, Punishment, and the Making of the Jim Crow Modernity*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016. 43-44. Print.  
Hicks, Cheryl D. *Talk with You Like a Woman: African American Women, Justice and Reform in New York, 1890-1935*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010. 154. Print.

“Misreading Mammy: Towards a Sexual Revolution of Third Wave Black Feminisms” developed from an overpowering desire to scour the role of white women’s complicity with white men in the subjugation of black women. This project ousts white women from their perceived role as sympathetic spectators on the sidelines to black women’s abuse via white men. As I will show, white women not only identified with white men’s patriarchal power, but they developed their own unique methods for renegotiating the terms of their own subordination vis-à-vis the black female body. A substantial amount of my research centers on examining white women’s primary role in commodifying, erasing, and sexually assaulting black women via the mammy archetype. I plumb the depths of white women’s refusal to acknowledge black women’s sufferings to consider white women’s utilization of the mammy myth as a tactical method for silencing black women’s voices and sanitizing black women’s unique subjectivities.

This is precisely the issue that Zora Neale Hurston explores in the opening pages of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. As Nanny recounts her time as a slave, she tells Janie that the mistress burst into her cabin one day demanding an explanation as to why Nanny’s baby had “gray eyes and yaller hair” (21). In response to the mistress’s violent attack, Nanny explains that “Ah don’t know nothin’ but what Ah’m told tuh do, ‘cause Ah ain’t nothin’ but uh nigger and uh slave” (21). In one succinct yet profound sentence, Nanny explains the circumscribed position that she inhabits and the limitations of her agency. Instead of arousing sympathy or empathy from the mistress, Nanny’s confession of her powerlessness incites her to a more intense form of anger. The source of the

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Haley and Hicks detail the frequency with which white women accused black domestic workers of theft. In 1892, Susan Conyers was convicted to twelve months in prison for “stealing” a ring, chair, and plate which amounted to less than \$5, Haley, 44.

mistress's rage is that she knows, on some level, that Nanny is not lying and that she is indeed the victim of her master's desire. But the calculus of white male patriarchal capitalism pits white women against black women. As a slaveholding white woman, the mistress knows all too well the ability of white patriarchal power to silence and alter her perception of reality, however twisted it may be. The mistress's pathological commitment to maintaining the patriarchal white order means that she must refuse Nanny's truth at all costs. The mistress's subsequent demand that Nanny be whipped by the overseer reaffirms her complicity within this system of white male desire and dominance. This brief scene, which serves as the foundation of my line of theoretical inquiry, captures white women's willful and deliberate oblivion to black women's plight.

Yet Nanny's experiences in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* also encourages our reconsideration of enslaved black women as erotic subjects. Although the master has total and absolute control over Nanny, the terms that Hurston uses to describe their sexual encounter hints at a level of intimacy that moves beyond a strictly sexual relationship. Recounting her last encounter with the master, Nanny remembers how he "made me let down mah hair for de last time. He sorta wropped his hand in it, pulled mah big toe, lak he always done..." (21). Of particular interest here is the absence of noticeable physical violence. In fact, there is a measure of tenderness in the master's actions towards Nanny. Hurston's rendering of the master's actions here as the gentle behavior of a lover introduces a discomfiting element into the master-slave dynamic precisely because it seems as if Nanny and the master have established a routine between themselves ("lak he always done") reminiscent of a relationship between two lovers. To be clear, I am not positing that Nanny loves or even has an affection for her master, but that Hurston forces

us to consider the possibility of a mutual affection between the oppressor and the oppressed. Because a significant portion of “Misreading Mammy” focuses on the interior sexual lives of enslaved black women, I am particularly concerned with reading moments such as these through a third-wave black feminist critique because it brings enslaved black women’s erotic subjectivities more clearly into focus. As Joan Morgan asserts in *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost*, “I [need] a feminism brave enough to fuck with the grays” (59). “Misreading Mammy” “fucks with the grays” by moving beyond the oppressor-victim dynamic to consider enslaved black women as sexual subjects who utilized their sexuality as an emancipatory tool granting them agency and pleasure. To this end, I read mammy as irrefutable representation of enslaved black women’s sexual subjectivity largely hidden beneath white supremacist reconfigurations of her.

The myth of mammy, the amorphous and enormous black woman eagerly serving her white charges with home-cooked food and an unwavering grin, is fostered and sustained by enslaved black women’s legacy of economic and sexual exploitation within the plantation household. As Rebecca Sharpless asserts, “For more than three hundred years, from the first importation of slaves into Jamestown until the 1960s, African American women served as cooks for privileged white families in the American South” (2). Although Mammy is a purely white supremacist imagining developed to sate white nostalgia for the Old South in the wake of the devastating Civil War loss, the moniker nonetheless encompasses a broad range of terms and positions that enslaved black women occupied within the plantation household as house servants, nursemaids, nurses, and cooks.

Over the last three decades, Black feminist scholars have produced an array of archival sources emphasizing the plantation household as an incredibly violent and volatile space nothing like the idyllic proslavery imaginings of child-like slaves frolicking around the plantation. In her seminal *Arn't I a Woman*, historian Deborah Gray-White notes that while house servants could expect to receive a measure of care denied to enslaved black women working in the fields, they endured a level of intense pressure since “they were always under the scrutiny of the white family and far more subject to their mood swings” (51). Because Black men and women working within the plantation household faced the persistent gaze of their white oppressors, they hardly ever received a respite from this intense scrutiny. Disentangling the actual enslaved black women from their imagined place as lovable mammies allows Black feminists to more clearly expose the parasitical element of white oppression in its absolute necessity for black inferiority.

For the most part, substantial attention has been paid to how Mammy's wide smile and hefty body conceals her own rape at the hands of the white men. The focus has largely centered on the capitalistic gains Mammy's image yields. By constructing the enslaved black woman as benevolent mother to the nation, white men ensured Mammy's easy consumption underneath the white gaze. But there is less primary research exploring white women's utilization of the mammy trope as a means of erasing black women's sexuality from view in order to bolster their femininity as the pure ideal to which every woman should aspire. From Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* to Alice Randall's *The Wind Done Gone*, Black women writers have consistently untangled enslaved black women from the mammy myth. Despite the fact that the “the mammy image is central to



interlocking systems of race, gender, and class oppression,” we have yet to fully engage with white women’s steady manipulation of the trope as a vehicle for white women’s self-fashioning of their own suppressed sexual thoughts and desires and the inherent violence involved in this endeavor (Hill-Collins 71).

A number of scholars allude to or mention white women’s enactment of violence against enslaved black women. In *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family, From Slavery to the Present*, Jacqueline Jones explains that “patterns of mistress-initiated violence toward black women suggest that such acts were just as often spontaneous outbursts of rage as they were deliberate measures to reform behavior” (23). Still, Jones goes on to center white women’s jealousy over their husband’s excursions into enslaved black women’s cabins as the chief reason for white women’s bold acts of violence directed against enslaved black women (24). Jones and other Black feminist scholars are not alone in this assessment, however. Rather than see white women’s violence as a necessary feature of plantation life, a number of historians view white women’s violence as sporadic, spontaneous outbursts. According to historian Drew Gilpin Faust, “exercise of the violence fundamental to slavery was overwhelmingly the responsibility and prerogative of white men” (64). White women, in Faust’s estimation, were unwilling conscripts in meting out violence and did so only as the “master’s subordinate and surrogate” (64). Conceptualizing white women’s violence as a last-ditch effort on their parts to regain a sense of control in their own lives essentially erases white women’s role in the systematic enactment of violence against enslaved black women. Thavolia Glymph’s more recent research on mistresses’ violence in *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* is one of the few sustained

studies on the issue of white women's sustained acts of violence against enslaved black people. In her groundbreaking text, African American historian Glymph examines white women's violence as an essential tool with which white women constructed and fashioned their own identity. Cautioning scholars against depicting plantation mistresses as "friends" of enslaved black women, Glymph posits that "If the authority of planter women is defined by the restrictions, legal and customary, imposed by white male authority, their power and violence disappear" (3). Indeed, the overwhelming amount of critical attention paid to white men's despicable actions overshadows white women's complicity with white men and patriarchy in dominating and exploiting black women. Moreover, centering white men's narratives of exploitation forecloses the possibility for considering how the faithful mammy slave narrative motivated white women's abuse of black women specifically for failing to embody this pathological trope. The scars that Sylvia Dubois's mistress permanently etched onto her head at the tender age of five provides verifiable evidence of white women's capacity for deploying violence against enslaved black children, women, and men with very little influence or assistance from their husbands. By pinpointing white women's varied creative and imaginative uses of the mammy archetype I explore mammy as the mechanism responsible for keeping white female barbarity at bay.

While the recent publication of Micki McElyra's *Clinging to Mammy* informed my understanding of Mammy's significance to a nation nostalgic for the Old South, my project journeys along a slightly different track. McElyra's examination of the powerful role mammy plays in shaping American politics, economics, and racial realities is particularly insightful. In her fifth chapter, "The Violence of Affection," McElyra

restructures white women's pronouncements of their unwavering devotion for the black women serving in their homes as a kind of violence masquerading as love (161). As McElyra explains, blacks successfully resisted the Daughters of Confederacy's attempt to erect a mammy-like stature "honoring" black women's fidelity on the grounds that it reopened ugly wounds that would rather be forgotten by an overwhelming majority within the black community (161). My project considers white women's keen cognizance of the mammy archetype as fantastical propaganda rooted in white patriarchal supremacy. In fact, this study examines white women's violent actions as manifestations of frustration and resentment engendered by white women's inability to map the mammy archetype onto the actual black women serving in their homes. Thus, my research is as much about white women as it about black women because I am concerned with troubling long-standing notions of white mistresses as benevolently non-violent Southern Belles.

With this focus in mind, my project offers valuable insight into white women's erasure of black women's subjectivity by illuminating the degree to which white women benefited from rendering black women's bodies as *sexual* tools of white supremacist patriarchy. Equally compelling, mistresses craved black women's bodies in a way nearly identical to that of their husbands. Thus, not only were white women reinforcing whiteness as innocent through their exploitation against black women, but they were also offering up a more suitable black female body for white women's guiltless consumption. This greedy and guiltless consumption of enslaved black women represents the "sycophancy of white identity" so cogently explicated in Toni Morrison's close reading of Willa Cather's *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (19). Under Morrison's sharp eye, Cather's

purposes for contrasting Sapphira Colbert as a white woman incapable of walking and performing daily duties without slaves' assistance against the able-bodied enslaved black girl named Nancy is exposed as an imaginative device permitting Cather with an intellectual space to safely and freely contemplate white women's shoring up of power via Nancy's enslaved black female body. Morrison's theorizing on white women's penchant for constructing their own identities through a fabricated Africanist presence is the basis upon which I build and draw conclusions about white women's repeated use of the mammy archetype to deny black women's lived experiences of sexual abuse.

Mammy, imagined as a harmless black woman, becomes the perfect "dumping ground for those female functions a basically Puritan society could not confront" (Christian 2). The nexus between mammy's gender and race produced a useful device by which white women could freely deliberate their own repressed desires without sullyng their own purity. Mammy's unchanging image assisted in the tampering down of black women's sexuality, which white women regarded with equal parts fascination, disgust, and desire. This last factor is critical. Although mammy has been stripped of all sexuality in the popular and current imagination—her toothy grin still the standard for pancakes, syrup bottles, and good Southern comforts—white women's anxious interactions with her and the physical connotations lodged within her body suggest that her body signified carnality too visible to ignore. In reality then, mammy existed as a receptacle for forbidden topics too offensive for polite Southern ladies to mention. Though supposedly benevolent, mammy's presence on the plantation was a decidedly threatening one based on the latent sexuality concealed within her body. As Barbara Christian makes clear in her vivid description of Mammy's sensuality, enslaved black women fulfilling the role of

mammy embodied a kind of aberrant sexuality profoundly out of tune with the conservative mores of Puritan society:

All the functions of mammy are magnificently physical. They involve the body as sensuous, as funky, the part of woman that white Southern America was profoundly afraid of. Mammy, then, harmless in her position of slave, unable because of her giving nature to do harm, is needed as an image, a surrogate to contain all those fears of the physical female.

(Christian 2)

Interestingly, Christian's description of mammy refashions her as the literal embodiment of sexuality itself. Equally important, the sketch Christian draws contradicts Mammy's presumed harmlessness based on her inferior slave status. Simply put, Mammy appears a menacing figure. Viewing Mammy as a decidedly "sensuous" and "funky" woman in the households makes clear white women's deep investment in conferring the image of the benign, smiling, middle-aged black woman onto the wily black female bodies surrounding them on the plantation.

The mammy archetype, then, is central to dislodging white women from their privileged perch as innocent bystanders blameless in the overwhelmingly violent production of capitalistic slavery. Even more, assessing white women's enactment of violence as a defining feature of their lives which occurred separately from and sometimes in opposition to their husbands' wishes forces us to consider the multiple forms of violence white women devised as a means of attaining power. By structuring white women's attempts to remake black women into docile mummies as an insidious form of violence designed to erase black women's complex subjectivity, I recast white

women as prime executors of brutal acts of physical violence. In her letters, the Northern born Tryphena Blanche Holder Fox criticized the “rabble of negroes & Creoles” working in her Louisiana home for constantly devising schemes to avoid their daily duties (qtd. In Glymph 68). Mary, one of Fox’s house servants, routinely challenged Fox by completing her chores in such an indolent manner that Fox repeatedly wrote about Mary’s refusal to “do right.” “The better I treat her,” Fox wrote, “the more impudent and lazy she grows” (qtd. In Glymph 68). Mary’s deliberate indolence form the core of Fox’s frustrations and constitute her ultimately failed attempts to reshape Mary into the more pliable mammy figure. This refashioning of black women to better suit white women’s needs epitomizes what Saidaya Hartman calls “the terror of the mundane and quotidian” nature of white women’s daily enactment of violence against black women (3-4). White women’s desire to flatten the black women around them into one-dimensional cartoonish figures affirms the uniquely gendered ways white women wielded power over enslaved black women.

In rooting this unique brand of violence firmly within white women’s purview, I do not intend to diminish the impact of white women’s physical violence against black women. As a detailed look into white women’s journals and diaries will reveal, white women did not shy away from inflicting violence upon enslaved black men, women, and children. Archival documents present a plantation household at odds with Margaret Mitchell’s Mammy responsible for efficiently managing Tara plantation and Scarlett’s love life. Contrary to the scores of antebellum books and films displaying the proficient plantation household ran by a legion of well-organized slaves, enslaved women routinely provoked white women’s ire for rebelling via work stoppages, temporarily absconding to the nearby woods, and other acts of defiance. In short, when black women refused to act

as the subservient Mammy figure of white women's imaginings, white women responded with paternalistic displays of rage. White women's involvement in this project of erasure was a decidedly violent enterprise as enslaved black women's vehement resistance resulted many times in reluctant armistices, verbal rebukes, and, fisticuffs. Examining the depths of white women's psyche makes clear the Mammy archetype's functioning as the linchpin undergirding white women's isolated, deliberate, and systematic use of violence against enslaved black women.

Erasing black women's complex subjectivity has long been the currency of white women eager to construct fictionalized white supremacist depictions of black women but less excited to listen to actual black women. Recall the hostility with which Harriet Beecher Stowe regarded Harriet Jacobs. When Jacobs contacted Stowe about possibly writing a foreword to *Incidents*, Stowe did not believe Jacobs' account nor did she intend on authenticating the story. Stowe agreed, however, that if Jacobs's account turned out to be true then she would use Jacobs's hiding of herself in the attic as a source to corroborate her fictionalized account of Cassey tricking Legree. Thereafter, Stowe never responded to the slew of letters Jacobs sent her (Carme Manuel 37). Stowe's obvious disdain for assertive black women whom she could not utilize for her own gain left Jacobs feeling as though "Stowe had betrayed her as a woman, denigrated her as a mother, and threatened her as a writer" (Yellin xix). Jacobs's sentiment more clearly revealed Stowe's penchant for flattening black women into stock figures for whites' consumption. Neither should Stowe's dismissive behavior towards Jacobs be excused as a sporadic occurrence: Stowe's sense of superiority over black women surfaced even in her writings on Sojourner Truth as she went to great lengths to render Truth a "passive,

mysterious, and inhuman” figure virtually unrecognizable from the confident and insightful woman who inspired audiences with her fervent passion (Yellin 82). Stowe’s erasure of black women’s humanity emblemizes the comfort and ease with which Stowe assumed her role as “patroness” of the Black race and ownership of the fugitive slave tale while simultaneously ignoring or belittling actual black women’s contributions.

If Stowe is matriarch of white women’s horrifying legacy of appropriating black women’s pain for financial gain, then Kathryn Stockett is her 21<sup>st</sup> century heir apparent. Before *The Help*’s immense success as both book and film, Stockett sent a copy of her manuscript to Ablene Cooper, a black woman who served as maid to Stockett’s brother for 12 years. The copy of the book arrived with a note from Stockett explaining that while the main character in the book is an “African American child carer [sic] named Aibileen,” the character was not based on Cooper. When Cooper finally got around to reading *The Help*, she was shocked by the close resemblances between her and Aibileen Clarke. The striking similarities between the real Ablene Cooper and the fictionalized Aibileen Clarke trouble Stockett’s contention that Cooper did not serve as inspiration for the young white writer: both women are born in 1911, sport a gold tooth in the center of their mouth, and endure the pain of losing a young son. For Cooper, however, the central problem with Stockett’s text was not simply that Stockett had used her image without permission, but *The Help*’s repeated degradation of Aibileen Clarke, the fictionalized black maid who bears an unmistakable physical resemblance to Cooper. In her lawsuit against Stockett, Cooper cites Aibileen’s comparison of her skin to that of cockroach as an emotionally upsetting scene which left her deeply embarrassed due to the obviously



negative connotations embedded into linking a black insect to the skin of a dark-complexioned black woman.

Whether Stockett intentionally based her character off Ablene is not the most galling aspect of this saga. Rather, it is the blind eye Stockett casts when confronted by an actual black woman unhappy with what she believes to be a demeaning portrait. Despite taking the time to send Clarke a copy of the book complete with a personalized note, Stockett dismisses Clarke with ease, saying “If I add it up, the number of seconds where we’ve seen each other would be maybe ten or 15.” Stockett has repeatedly insisted that Clarke is not entitled to the \$75, 000 lawsuit. In light of Stockett’s refusal to even hear Cooper’s concerns, Stockett’s heralding of *The Help* as a text which privileges marginalized black women’s perspectives seems remarkably hollow. In an odd instance of art imitating life, Stockett imagines herself as a heroic white figure capable of telling black women’s stories in much the same way Skeeter assumes the position of esteemed storyteller for the fictional black women of Jackson, Mississippi. Like Skeeter, Stockett is the only one to truly benefit from telling black women’s stories as the significant wealth and fame Stockett achieves parallels Skeeter’s journey north to begin her new job in New York. Ablene Cooper, like the black domestic workers Skeeter leaves behind in the midst of the turbulent Civil Rights movement, becomes a mere footnote in a text purportedly determined to show black and white women that “We are just two people. Not that much separates us” (Stockett 492). Stockett’s and Skeeter’s colorblind racism practically mimics Stowe’s commodification of black women’s pain.

Stockett’s *The Help* is simply another remixed mammy narrative in a long line of the public’s fascination for invoking the subservient black servant. The innumerable

contemporary iterations and allusions to the Mammy myth reveal its enduring tenacity within liberal white spaces. Dolce and Gabana premiered their spring 2012 fashion line with a series of dresses featuring dark-skinned black women with large earrings and colorful head wraps made of fruit imprinted onto the fabric. Some models wore what were colloquially referred to as “Mammy earrings”: a figurine of a dark-skinned black woman with a turban style headdress literally hung from the ears of the mostly white models. Ironically enough, white models wore black women on their bodies and ears, but Dolce and Gabana did not hire one black model to represent their clothing. By literally wearing black women, Dolce and Gabana seemed to erase the painful past of American history in favor of presenting trendy accessories and dresses. In many ways, Dolce and Gabbana’s commodification of actual enslaved black women mirrored the successful pancake and syrup campaigns selling black women’s faces on them. It seemed, however, that Dolce and Gabbana was not attempting to sell comfort, but a modern cool aesthetic.

These trendy allusions to the mammy figure emerged yet again during the premiere episode of FOX’s “Scream Queens,” a satirical show about an elite white sorority. As a group of posh white girls waltz down the stairs of their sprawling mansion, one of the girls, Chanel Oberlin, disparages the white maid working for her by calling her a white mammy, “That obese specimen of human filth scrubbing bulimia vomit out of the carpet is Ms. Bean. I call her ‘white mammy’ because she’s essentially a house slave” (Braxton, “How ‘Scream Queens’ White Mammy Problem May Have Tarnished Fox’s Diversity Glow”). Chanel goes on to coerce her maid into reciting the timeworn line from *Gone with the Wind*: “I don’t know nuthin bout birthin’ babies!” There is something truly disconcerting about Chanel’s invocation of mammy and Prissy precisely because it seems

so at odds with a show touted for its youthful and modern comedic slant. The image of the young, rich, white girls of “Scream Queens” mocking a domestic worker by calling her a “white mammy” proves that the youthful white mainstream audience will simply find different and perhaps more elusive methods to tacitly mock black women’s history of sexual abuse and dismiss black women’s pain. When 23-year old Miley Cyrus referred to Snoop Dogg as “my real mammy” a month later at the MTV Music awards the scripted moment seemed strikingly prescient (Zelinger, “Miley Cyrus Uses the Term “Mammy” On Stage at the 2015 MTV VMAs”). In fact, Cyrus’s labeling of a black man with an antiquated term typically used to define women, and more specifically black women, confirms the degree to which white supremacist capitalism creates newfangled forms of racism to implicitly degrade black people. More specifically, Cyrus’s rhetorical maneuver performs the similar task of belittling black women’s plight by carelessly substituting the black female body for Snoop’s black male body. If history is indeed knowable by the present, then these instances of white women relying on the mammy trope to demean, demoralize, or simply silence black subjects encourages an excavation of white women’s varied uses of the mammy myth.

Since a chief aim of this study is to reimagine the role white women played in denying black women humanity and agency, my intellectual scope and purpose is to deliberately cross examines a broad range of source material. As Kimberly Wallace-Sanders avers in *Mammy: A Century of Race, Gender, and Southern Memory*, “interpretations of the mammy too often isolate the image within narrow categories: as a literary stereotype, or as a historic reality, or as an advertising trademark, or as a visual subject” (2). While my overarching focus centers on textual analysis of novels, I

nonetheless incorporate discussions of film and art into my theoretical analyses. In the following paragraphs, I will illuminate my intent to mine the incessant struggles between white and black women in the wake of white women's routine attempts to map the docile mammy image onto black women.

In Chapter One, 'A Thing We Can't Name': Abject Rhetorical Violence in the Antebellum South," I revisit the diaries and journals of slaveholding white women to reveal white women's legacy of erasing enslaved black women's plight via "abject rhetorical violence." Using Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject, I highlight the more subtle yet deeply troubling violence embedded into white women's erasure of black women's subjectivity. Illuminating historians' reluctance to position slave mistresses as primary enactors of violence, I correct this perspective through a steady deliberation of the multiple forms of violence white women marshalled to shore up their dominance over enslaved black women. Although the bulk of my analysis centers on closely examining key passages in white women's diaries, I rely on fictional texts written by black women to illuminate the taboo issues that white women could not bear to confront when faced with the frank sexualities of enslaved black women's plight. Chapter One also undermines the traditional white supremacist conception of mammy as an elderly black woman lacking sexuality. In fact, white women's writings about their black nursemaids and enslaved caregivers confirms these cooks and nursemaids as young, sexually attractive women whose very presence generated white women's veiled ponderings and anxieties about sex.

The second chapter, "Free as She Was Going to Be": Spaces of Subversion in Alice Randall's *The Wind Done*, considers Mammy's overtly sexual body and her

utilization of sex as a tradeable and serviceable commodity. In her 2001 debut novel, Randall imbues Mammy with a sense of humanity by injecting Mammy with sexuality. The primary goal of this chapter is a consideration of *The Wind Done Gone*'s rootedness within the African American female slave narrative. By drawing links between Mammy's circumscribed life to Harriet Jacobs's traumatic experiences of sexual abuse, I submit that Randall's text is not simply a retelling of Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*, but a novel which shirks off the veil surrounding enslaved black women's rape and exploitation at the hands of master and mistress. In this light, *The Wind Done Gone* comes out from beyond the long shadow cast by Mitchell's master text and assumes its own cultural and literary significance within African American letters.

In Chapter Three, 'It Appeal to Me': The Swerve Ethos in Valerie Martin's *Property*, I explore the Black expressions and nonverbal looks of resistance that Sarah, the enslaved black woman in the 2003 novel, exhibits as a means of wresting authorial power away from her mistress. In its reimagining of the tense mistress-slave dynamics, this chapter reveals black women's resistance as a coded set of cultural values which are largely unreadable to white people standing outside the sphere of black culture. This chapter expands our understanding of the myriad modes of black resistance that enslaved black women relied upon to challenge white women's perceived superiority and dominance.

In my final chapter, "'Spoilt like a Rotten Oyster": Fictive Sterilization in Kathryn Stockett's *The Help*," I consider how black domestic workers serve as the mechanism by which Kathryn Stockett unloads a trio of pathological stereotypes onto black women which effectively punish black mothers for their overly sexualized black

bodies. I highlight the ways that Stockett's 2009 novel represents a stealthier kind of racism that does not malign black women with one particular stereotype, but rather deposits a heap of competing and interlocking racisms onto black women simultaneously. Ultimately, I expose the dangerously seductive quality of Stockett's brand of insidious racism as offering audiences a sentimentalized white feminist narrative in which white and black women bond together in spite of their vastly different racial and socioeconomic backgrounds.

As addressed earlier, this project injects black women's humanity back into the historical framework by exploring the ways in which white women waged physical and psychological warfare against enslaved black women for rejecting the docile mammy of the white female imagination. Probing the source of white slaveholding women's discontent is essential because it illuminates the degree to which slave mistresses understood mammy as a purely fictional creation that was nonetheless crucial to maintaining the antebellum status quo. As my study will show, viewing white women's attempts to etch the mammy archetype onto black women becomes yet another iteration of violence that reveals white women's complicity in the sexual, physical, and psychological abuse of enslaved black women. Dismissing the impact of white women's violence against black women as spontaneous outbursts of misplaced rage runs the risk of absolving white women of their routinized enactment of terror against black people within the system of white supremacist capitalistic slavery. Thus, writing white women's history of violence back into the historical record restores black women's agency and subjectivity so that black women's acts of resistance emerge as profound assertions of humanity.

## Chapter One

### “A Thing We Can’t Name”: Abject Rhetorical Violence in the Antebellum South

Flooded with images of bruised and bloodied bodies, the critically acclaimed *12 Years a Slave* features a scene noteworthy for its conspicuous lack of physical violence. When Mr. Ford, master of a sprawling Louisiana plantation, returns home after purchasing two slaves named Eliza and Solomon, his wife eagerly approaches their newly acquired property. The sound of Eliza’s uncontrollable sobbing dampens Mrs. Ford’s enthusiasm, however. After learning that Eliza’s children have been sold away, Mrs. Ford says, “Poor, poor woman. A bit of food and rest and you’ll soon forget about your children.” The ease with which Mrs. Ford dismisses Eliza’s children and her status as mother exposes the naked violence lodged in her curt response. More than a failed attempt at empathy then, Mrs. Ford’s words contain a frightening violent reality: Mrs. Ford possesses the very real power to suppress Eliza’s mournful weeps whenever she chooses. The terror lodged within the prognosis and wish—“you’ll soon forget about your children”—is that Eliza will pay a high physical price if she refuses to comply with Mrs. Ford’s thinly veiled expectation. As becomes clear later in the movie, this expectation is actually a warning, if not a threat.

The dainty way in which Mrs. Ford warns Eliza illuminates the uniquely gendered ways white women demonstrated their investment within white supremacist capitalistic patriarchy. The harrowing truth of the matter is that the basic tenants of the Cult of True Womanhood gave way to white women’s mastery of a kind of insidious violence against black women appearing so utterly harmless and “mundane” that the “terror can hardly be discerned” (Hartman 4). With its emphasis on piety,

submissiveness, purity, and domesticity, this ideology privileged white women's unwavering dedication to their husbands, children, and household (Carby 23). Through their purity and cleanliness, white women deliberately performed a delicate civility to distinguish themselves from black womanhood. Mistresses then assumed the role of teachers to these wayward, child-like black women working within their households. Mrs. Ford's seemingly polite suggestion of a meal and a good night's rest as worthy replacement of Eliza's children is essentially an attempt to indoctrinate Eliza with fundamental slave credo.

During an antebellum period in which middle-class mothers and wives were elevated to saintly stations, enslaved black women inhabited an anomalous position. As Angela Davis explains, "In the eyes of slaveholders, slave women were not mothers at all; they were simply guaranteeing the growth of the labor force" (7). Deliberating excluding black women from the realm of motherhood allowed slaveholders to successfully disguise their forced separation of black women from their children into an act as commonplace as selling away the cow's calves. Mrs. Ford's attempt to erase Eliza's identity as a mother forms a direct parallel to slaveholders' whipping and beating of enslaved black people.

By displaying Mrs. Ford's clear inculcation *and* execution of white supremacist precepts reducing black mothers to mere breeders, *12 Years a Slave* illuminates mistresses' routine wielding of violence against black women working in the plantation household. Although ample evidence exists suggesting that physical conflict between mistresses and slaves occurred on a more frequent basis than that between masters and slaves, white women's utilization of violence is rarely examined as a tactical device



employed by mistresses in an effort to shore up their steadfast commitment to preserving white supremacist ideologies.<sup>2</sup> The scarred and whipped black bodies dotting the plantation landscape were not the brutal work of white men alone. Yet the historiographical trend has largely been to envision white women as victims and not as perpetrators of white patriarchal slavery. Consequently, white men appear as the true culprits responsible for manipulating white women into roles of complicity and pitting them against their “natural” allies. To be sure, Southern white women occupied a precarious position throughout the antebellum period. Brenda E. Stevenson’s description of slave mistresses lays bare the imbroglio white women found themselves in as partners to powerful slaveholding white men:

As women, even as wealthy women, they did not have the power to challenge the profoundly entrenched institution. Bound by the precepts of their roles as obedient, submissive wives, slaveholding women acted principally as their husbands’ representatives in the lives of slaves, not as independent, rebellious agents out to reconstruct or even to refine the system. Slaveholding men both designed and perpetuated slavery. (198-9)

Stevenson’s succinct summation of white women as “obedient” wives to their husbands in all things succinctly encapsulates the limitations of white womanhood. North America’s oppressive patriarchal structure, visibly apparent in the adoption of English “coverture” or property laws binding wives to their husbands virtually ensured white women’s subjugation to their husbands. “Coverture” laws denied married women

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<sup>2</sup> Again, I want to reiterate Thavolia Glymph’s *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* as a study which breaks from this mold. Glymph’s text is essential for understanding white women’s enactment of violence as normal and natural occurrence.

individual legal existence from their husbands, basically usurping the legal and social agency of married women (Kerber 14). But to treat white women as victims at best, and forced accomplices at worst, in the system of slavery is to grossly underestimate white women's agency and complex investment in white supremacist patriarchal capitalism. This overemphasis on white women as victims fosters the illusion of an intimate connection among white and black women cultivated by a "system of bondage [which] ultimately mandated the subordination of all women, both black and white" (Jones 23). But this problematic line of reasoning conceptualizes white and black women as subordinates sipping from twin cups of oppression by collapsing the differences—free, enslaved, black, and white—between two distinct groups of women. Applying Hazel Carby's cautionary advice here usefully problematizes this perspective: "If women, as an undifferentiated group, are compared to blacks, or slaves, as an undifferentiated group, then it becomes impossible to see the articulations of racism within ideologies of gender and of gender within the ideologies of racism" (25). The conflation of all women into an "undifferentiated group" obfuscates white women's access to power and culpability with white men in maintaining black oppression.

For a number of academicians, then, the purview of plantation violence surfaces only so far as it remains firmly ensconced within the white *male* domain. While historian Jacqueline Jones acknowledges, "White women devised barbaric forms of punishment that resulted in the mutilation or permanent scarring" of enslaved black women, she qualifies this violence as a deviation from the established norm since it typically occurs "in the heat of the moment" (25-6). It is perhaps not surprising then that the bulk of scholarly analyses examining white women's enactment of violence has not shifted

significantly from nearly two centuries ago when Solomon Northup's editor and amanuensis David Wilson characterized Mistress Epps's violence against her slave Patsey as the unfortunate result of her husband's lascivious desire for Patsey: "Mistress Epps was not naturally such an evil woman, after all. She was possessed of the devil, jealousy, it is true, but aside from that, there was much in her character to admire" (198). As a result of statements like these, Mistress Epps's hurling of broken bottles and thick chunks of wood at Patsey comprise an unfortunate blemish on an otherwise admirable character of a woman whose savage behavior appears an impulsive yet *justifiable* reaction to her husband's dastardly actions. But portraying mistresses' violence as spontaneous acts of passion relegates white women to a peripheral place in the inescapably violent Southern climate. In a slave economy predicated and sustained on the corporeal punishment of black bodies, the question is not if white women were powerless to resist white supremacist patriarchal capitalism but rather to what degree their investment in white supremacist patriarchal capitalism combined with their limited agency impacted their treatment of the enslaved.

Scrutinizing white women's acts of violence confirms their actions as calculated attempts to define and maintain their revered social status and rank over black women. In many ways, slave mistresses' reliance on violence paralleled that of their male counterparts. Mistresses created the terroristic atmosphere spurring a group of enslaved black men from Second Creek, Mississippi to plot the overthrow and murder of their mistresses and masters in 1861. Court documents reveal the men's chief reason for staging the coup arose from a desire to prevent the unrelenting acts of violence and murder white women habitually inflicted upon the enslaved men's wives, daughters, and

sisters (Jordan 164). Father and son Nelson and Wesley Mobley joined the rebellion after “Miss Mary” beat and drowned Wesley’s sister. Clearly, the Mobleys and other black men involved viewed their mistresses as slaveholders exercising their fundamental right to violence.

For Frederick Douglass, too, white women’s use of violence more clearly elucidated the unchecked power of the slave mistress. In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass describes the figures of two enslaved black women, Henrietta and Mary, as “dejected, emaciated, mangled, and excoriated” (149). In one particularly distressing passage, Douglass recalls Mary’s “head, neck, and shoulders” being literally “cut to pieces” (149). While Douglass is not entirely sure if Mary’s and Henrietta’s master whips them, he has no doubts about the mistress’s primary role in abusing the women: “I do not know that [Mary’s] master ever whipped her, but I have often been an eye witness of the revolting and brutal inflictions by Mrs. Hamilton” (149). The “festering sores” covering Mary’s head are “caused by the lash of the cruel mistress” (149). Admitting that Mrs. Hamilton’s vicious behavior towards her slaves was “generally condemned” by those members within the Baltimore community, Douglass clarifies that “the very parties who censured the cruelty of Mrs. Hamilton would have condemned and promptly punished any attempt to interfere with Mrs. Hamilton’s *right* to cut and slash her slave to pieces” (150). This accentuation on Mrs. Hamilton’s “*right*” to exert her authority over Mary and Henrietta implicates mistresses as instigators and executors of violence on the plantation.

By focusing on slave mistresses’ physical displays of violence, I hope to broaden our understanding of white women’s agency within antebellum slavery. Moreover, I want to underscore the social currency white women derived from refusing to identify with

black women and how this denial reveals their investment within white supremacist capitalistic patriarchy via the physical and psychological assault of black women. Julia Kristeva provides a useful critical lens for considering the profound sense of dissonance the dominant subject feels when encountering the disruptive presence of the Other. To this end, I am primarily concerned with explicating white women's imaginings of black women as trespassers tainting the plantation household as it dispels notions of sexless, benevolent black mammies whose noticeably inferior bodies and beauty stood out in stark contrast to their white mistresses. Kristeva's definition of the abject as a reaction triggered not by "lack of cleanliness or health," but by "what disturbs identity, system, and order" provides useful insights into how the Other's precarious existence as interloper collapses boundaries (4). Thus, I describe the brand of violence that mistresses relied on to establish their authority over enslaved black women as "abject rhetorical violence."

Surfacing in mistresses' journals and letters, abject rhetorical violence describes the seemingly innocuous passages in white women's personal writings impugning black women's characters whenever they encountered the "magnificently physical body" of enslaved black women working as nursemaids, cooks, and "mammies" within their homes (Christian 2). While I closely scrutinize key passages in white women's diaries and journals, I frame these archival documents alongside fictional texts to unearth those taboo subjects that Southern genteel women could not bring themselves to discuss even in their own private diaries. Through the eyes of white women, enslaved black women stood outside the bounds of respectable womanhood as their darker skin represented disarray and disorder. However, for mistresses, the truly disconcerting aspect of these

chaotic black female bodies hinged on the perception of black women's sexuality as one unloosed from traditional societal mores.

This limitless sexuality stood in stark contrast to Southern white womanhood's rootedness in chastity and purity. Fostered against the backdrop of black women's overtly sexual bodies, white femininity elevated white women to superior positions while confining black women to the label of dangerously lascivious Jezebels whose grossly sexual bodies corrupted innocent white men too weak to resist. Yet, even though the patriarchal configuration of authentic womanhood condemned black women to sex-crazed troglodytes, white women expressed a desire to possess the uncontrollable sexuality the enslaved black female body symbolized in the white male imagination. When slaveholder Rachel O' Connor found her overseer with an enslaved black woman named Eliza, she thought he was a "villain" and noted that Eliza had been a "good girl before that villain came here" (O' Connor 127). However, O'Connor eventually "whipped [Eliza] myself, and cut her curls off." Whipping Eliza and cutting her curls off becomes the means by which O'Connor heaps shame onto Eliza for what she perceives to be Eliza's profligate sexuality. Of course, O' Connor cannot whip the overseer but her decision to whip Eliza and her assertion that she had been "a good girl" seems to indicate that since white women could not conceive of black women's rape, they perceived black women who, despite eking out pitiful lives as slaves, remained somewhat free from the chains silencing them. The mixed race body, then, became a contested battleground in which white women sought to reassert themselves as chaste and virtuous superiors to black women. There is also an undeniably erotic element bound up in O'Connor's and

white women's whippings of enslaved black women that has hardly gone unnoticed by black women writers.

Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* captures the profound sense of disempowerment white women experienced when encountering the enslaved black woman's seemingly aberrantly sexual body. Recounting her enslavement to Janie, Nanny remembers the time her mistress burst in on her tiny cabin demanding that she see Nanny's week-old baby. Immediately recognizing the child's "gray eyes and yaller hair" as telltale signs of her husband's infidelity, the mistress attacks Nanny with blows that burn "lak fire" (Hurston 16). But Hurston also manages to imbue this scene with a conspicuously erotic flair. The mistress's explosive outburst mimics her husband's controlling tendencies as she relegates Nanny to a subordinate position through the vicious blows and words she flings at Nanny. The psychology involved in the mistress's ordering of Nanny's whipping falls in line with the same sadomasochistic attitude Frederick Douglass witnesses Captain Anthony exhibit while beating Aunt Hester. Recalling how Captain Anthony seemed to "take great pleasure" in stripping Aunt Hester so that her bare body remained exposed, Douglass attaches a sexual component to Captain Anthony's severe beating of Aunt Hester since "the louder she screamed, the harder he whipped; and where the blood ran fastest, there he whipped longest"(Frederick Douglass 4). Similarly, Nanny's mistress aspires to achieve a similar level of gratification in envisioning of Nanny on her knees, completely subordinate to the overseer's whip:

Ah wouldn't dirty mah hands on yuh. But first thing in de mornin' de overseer will take you to de whppin' post and tie you down on yo' knees and cut de hide offa yo' yalla back. One hundred lashes wid a raw-hide on

yo' bare back. Ah'll have you whipped till de blood run down to yo' heels.

Ah mean to count de licks myself. (Hurstun 13)

The perverse imagery of Nanny's nude body bent on all fours exposes the mistress's cruel intent as one borne from a warped desire to see Nanny whipped until the blood flows down to her heels. Like Captain Anthony, the mistress will derive pleasure each time the whip cracks against Nanny's scarred and whipped body. While the mistress's ire for her husband plays a factor in her rage against Nanny, the mistress's punishment of Nanny also arises from a need to regulate and seize control over the boundless sexuality within Nanny's body.

Analyzing the mistress's behavior through the standpoint first theorized by Hortense Spillers in her insightful examination of Mrs. Flint's repeated harassment of Linda Brent in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* adds a troubling layer to this scene that goes beyond the scope of the "jealous mistress" narrative. Centering attention on the mistress as the perpetrator of terror, Spillers argues that Mrs. Flint assumes a "male alibi and prosthetic motion that is mobilized *at night*" when she terrorizes Brent by whispering into her ear at night (76). Essentially, both Dr. Flint *and Mrs. Flint* desire to "inculcate his or her will into the vulnerable, supine body" of Brent.

Thus, the strangely erotic scene in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* serves as a lens for elucidating the unspoken impetus behind mistress's real-life use of violence against black women in their homes. Nanny, like Brent and other enslaved black women in the same predicament, is thrown directly into the center of this war between master and mistress to seize control of the enslaved black female body. Dismissing the mistress's violent explosion of blows onto Nanny as resulting solely from misdirected anger



obscures the mistress's outrageous behavior as stemming from an attempt to claim her stake in Nanny's body. Beneath all the enmity white women reserved for black women, white women resented black women for their perceived lack of sexual inhibition. Mary Chestnut's musings reveal her steadfast belief in enslaved black women's unrestricted sexual freedom: "If white women behaved like either white men or black women they would be "ridiculed," "abandoned," and sent out of any decent house" (Chestnut 168-169, 309). Chestnut held no sympathy for enslaved black women, sardonically querying: "Who thinks any worse of a Negro or mulatto woman for being a thing we can't name?" (243).

By attempting to grasp control of Nanny's body, the mistress operates as the master's co-conspirator in her maintenance and regulation of black women's sexuality. Hours before the mistress's violent attack, the master visits Nanny in her cabin where he makes her "let down" her "hair for de last time" and pulls Nanny's big toe "lak he always done" before joining the Civil War (Hurston 20). The obvious sexual undertones buried within the euphemistic "let down mah hair for de last time" hint at the master's repeated rape of Nanny and the ways in which her body—from her hair to her big toe—remains under total submission to a master who stops by her cabin to savor all those times he spent possessing Nanny's body as his own. There is also a twisted eroticism at work here too. Nanny's sexual exploitation is complicated by the fact that her sexual violation seems to have produced genuine emotion for Nanny within the master. In fact, the master displays a perverse sense of tenderness and devotion towards Nanny—sneaking away to visit her for what is presumably the last time before he enlists in the Confederate Army. Perhaps most threatening to the mistress then, is not the sexual aspect as much as the fact

that master possesses actual feelings for Nanny which have clearly moved beyond the sexual. Hurston's reimagining of the master's complicated feelings for Nanny appear in Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave* when Master Epps refuses to acquiesce to his wife's demands that he sell Patsey, informing her that "I will rid myself of you well before I do away with her." White men's rape of enslaved black women like Nanny and Patsey is disturbing for the obvious ways in which white men casually assumed total control over black women's bodies, but these uneasy couplings also confirm the threat that enslaved black women posed to white women as one which goes much deeper than the realm of sexual exploitation. It is not my intent here to romanticize white men's rape of black women but to put forth the idea that white men's genuine emotions for black women challenged white women's imagined exclusivity to white men's heart. And, like their husbands and other white men who routinely raped black women, mistresses derived a titillating pleasure from whipping black women.

When white women gazed at black women, they devalued enslaved black women's bodies by reducing them to what Toni Morrison calls an American Africanisms. According to Morrison, whites invented static notions of Africans as vessels for "contemplating chaos and civilization, desire, and fear, and a mechanism for testing the problems and blessings of freedom" within the white imagination (7). In their journals and letters, white women assigned a pathological blackness onto black women that essentially erased enslaved black women's rape, subjugation, and economic exploitation. Instead of regarding black women as their allies in navigating through the tangled patriarchal web of white supremacy, mistresses utilized the black female body as a textual script for meditating on their own imprisonment within a society venerating them

as women so long as they remained dutiful mothers and wives. Morrison's valuation of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* as a story about an invalid white woman who stores up agency through the lithe and virile body of her slave girl underscores the parasitical nature of whiteness as the mistress fundamentally needs the black woman in order to construct her own identity.

For the wealthy Georgia plantation mistress Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, black women's bodies existed as a literal tabula rasa upon which she could freely imbue meaning. Keeping an extensive journal detailing her life before, during, and after the Civil War, Thomas provides insight into the life of an elite and educated mistress. Although Thomas's sparingly mentions black women, her brief snippets of the black women working in her home speaks volumes. In an entry dated 1859, Thomas spends a substantial amount of time pondering the "white children of slavery" and the "Fancy [mulatta] girls" whose lighter skin command higher prices at the slave auctions (Burr 168). Tellingly, Thomas's musings about miscegenation arise from a seemingly innocuous encounter with her nursemaid, Lurany. When Lurany unexpectedly enters Thomas's room carrying her mixed race child, Thomas abruptly switches attention away from the mundane topic she had been previously pondered and allows her mind to wander to more verboten subjects: "Lurany interrupted me just now bringing in Lulah—and giving a new turn to my thoughts" (Burr 167).

Marveling at the fact that Lurany's child seems "as white as any white child," Thomas launches into a lengthy deliberation about miscegenation between white men and black women. Lurany's mere presence seems to initiate this reflection. When Thomas sees Lurany holding her mixed race child in her arms, she immediately begins ruminating

on what she believes to be the rampant immorality plaguing Southern homes. That is, Thomas literally uses Lurany's body as a mechanism to safely interrogate the horrors of slavery. Thomas echoes Mary Boykin Chestnut and other mistresses when she writes that "Southern women are I believe all at heart abolitionists" due to miscegenation. Going even further, Thomas asserts that the "institution of slavery degrades the white man more than the Negro and exerts a most deleterious effect upon our children" (Burr 167). For Thomas, slavery is a detestable institution because it heaps irrevocable harm on white families, namely hers. Indeed, historians surmise that the "great secret" of Thomas's diary is the revelation that her philandering husband most likely fathered a son from an enslaved woman of mixed-race.<sup>3</sup>

Thomas's fixation on the supposed damage slavery does to *white* families parallels a pivotal scene in Kate Chopin's short story, "Desiree's Baby." "Desiree's Baby" highlights Chopin's artistic knack for examining women's identities beyond the role of wife and mother. Long considered a feminist text for its engagement of a young woman's self-worth absent that of her husband, "Desiree's Baby" tackles the taboo topic of miscegenation in nineteenth century Creole Louisiana when Desiree's mother intuits her grandchild's black heritage while gazing upon the quadroon nursemaid: "Madame Valmonde had never removed her eyes from the child. She lifted it and walked with over to the window that was lightest. She scanned the baby narrowly, then looked as searchingly at Zandrine, whose face was turned to gaze across the fields" (Chopin 243). Quite literally a eureka moment, Madame Valmonde quietly realizes that her grandchild carries black ancestry because the baby shares the same tawny complexion as Zandrine.

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<sup>3</sup> Historian Nell Painter, in the introduction to *The Secret Eye*, concludes that "the great secret" of Thomas's journal is that her husband most likely committed adultery with a slave woman, 59.

In most remarkable fashion, Madame Valmonde's quickly overlooks Zandrine's plight. With her face "turned to gaze across the fields," Zandrine is effectively silenced, unable to speak about her own possible experience of sexual abuse. In a text lauded for its focus on wives' subordination to their husbands, "Desiree's Baby" deliberately resists exploring the enslaved mixed race woman's probable exploitation at the hands of a white man. Employing black women's bodies as a literal device to illuminate white women's suffering under patriarchy, Chopin exerts "abject rhetorical violence" on black women whose suffering is ostensibly erased at the expense of generating sympathy for white women. In Chopin's short story, there seems to be a sizable amount of mixed raced children present on the plantation. One of the mixed race children rouses Desiree's curiosity and in an eerily revelatory moment Desiree, like her mother, comes to a startling epiphany while staring at the body of a little quadroon boy:

The baby, half naked, lay asleep upon her own great mahogany bed, that was like a sumptuous throne, with its satin-lined half-canopy. One of La Blanche's little quadroon boys - half naked too - stood fanning the child slowly with a fan of peacock feathers. Desiree's eyes had been fixed absently and sadly upon the baby, *while she was striving to penetrate the threatening mist that she felt closing about her*. She looked from her child to the boy who stood beside him, and back again; over and over. "Ah!" It was a cry that she could not help; which she was not conscious of having uttered. The blood turned like ice in her veins, and a clammy moisture gathered upon her face. *She tried to speak to the little quadroon boy; but no sound would come*, at first. When he heard his name uttered, he looked

up, and his mistress was pointing to the door. He laid aside the great, soft fan, and obediently stole away, over the polished floor, on his bare tiptoes.

(244; *emphasis mine*)

This lengthy passage reveals Desiree's confrontation with the abject, or the "jettisoned object" that is "radically excluded and draws [Desiree] toward the place where meaning collapses (Kristeva 2). Faced with the abject, Desiree is rendered speechless: "She tried to speak...but no sound would come." While La Blanche's "little quadroon boy" functions as the abjected object in this scene, it is not entirely clear whether the resemblance Desiree notices between her baby and the nameless slave boy is that the two children have the same skin tone *and* phenotypical features as each other due perhaps to the fact that they share the same father. Is this the "threatening mist" that Desiree strives to penetrate as she glances back and forth from her baby to La Blanche's child? Is this the unspeakable terror that Desiree cannot afford to acknowledge? Although fictional, "Desiree's Baby" reveals the extent to which enslaved black bodies function as signifiers of certain uncomfortable truths white women could not bring themselves to confront for fear of the impact it would have on their own identities.

However, Chopin's utilization of black female characters is ultimately a self-serving one: "Desiree's Baby" allows Chopin to explore complex issues affecting white women via the black female body. Chopin's deployment of "abject rhetorical violence" mirrors the linguistic strategies Willa Cather devises in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. That neither Madame Valmonde nor Desiree even briefly consider the possibility of Master Armand Arbigney raping Zandrine speaks to their inability to actually see Zandrine as a living, breathing person. Significantly, Chopin never permits Madame Valmonde or

Desiree to consider La Blanche nor Zandrine as likely victims of the master's sexual desire. This manipulation of black bodies in order to fashion them as perfect tools of service for white women's identity marks a disturbing trend in the fictional works of Cather and Chopin. But the source of this trend seems to have originated with actual white slave mistresses like Thomas.

The undeniable presence of mixed raced bodies permeating the short story and Thomas's plantation is emblematic of white women's intentional oblivion to enslaved black women's rape. By willfully refusing to *see* black women's suffering, Thomas and Chopin perform the same method of erasure practiced by the fictional white characters in "Desiree's Baby." Chopin's conscious erasure of the mixed-race woman exposes her works as displaying a specific brand of white supremacist feminism which hinges on the purposeful denial of black women's suffering.

It is this kind of parochial view that necessitates Thomas's refusal to engage with black women's exploitation at the hands of white men. In fact, the predicament of those enslaved black women working within her home and forced to endure life as perpetual concubines never enters Thomas's consciousness. As Morrison asks, "What intellectual feats had to be performed by the author or his critic to erase me from a society seething with my presence?" (Morrison 378; *Unspeakable*). But Thomas cannot bring herself to express empathy for these women as it would destabilize her own sense of superiority. While Thomas glibly suggests that black women are not to blame for the sexual dilemmas they faced, she goes on to explain that enslaved black women "know no incentive for doing well" (Burr 168). Morality, Thomas implicitly implies, does not reside within enslaved women as they all secretly desire white men's affection.

Unsurprisingly then, when an enslaved nursemaid named Susan speaks about her white father in a “most contemptuous manner,” Thomas tersely chastises Susan for speaking ill of her father. However, Susan’s bold response upsets Thomas’s idealistic construction of white men as worthy of respect despite their unrelenting abuse of black women:

What if he was [my father]? I don’t care anything for him and he don’t for me. If he had, he would have bought me when I was sold [to repay his debt]. Instead of that he was the auctioneer when I was sold for 75 dollars.

(Burr 169)

That Thomas expects Susan to show respect for a man callous enough to sell his own daughter reveals the degree to which Thomas subscribes to white supremacist patriarchy excusing white men for their actions. But Susan’s version of her father as a slaveholding patriarch who most likely raped her mother in an effort to satisfy his desire and expand his property undermines Thomas’s romanticized and wholly inaccurate perceptions. Moreover, Susan’s account highlights the diverse ways black women spoke up against their mistresses’ repeated attempts to sentimentalize the harsher elements of their lived experiences. Susan encourages a reimagining of gendered resistance that manifests itself not in physical acts of resistance but in Eliza’s mournful weeping for her children. Although Mistress Ford attempts to sever Eliza’s ties to motherhood, Eliza’s public weeping surfaces as a quiet rejection of her mistress’s wishes. In refusing to hide her pain, Eliza forces the mistress to recognize her suffering as that of a mother coping with the permanent loss of her children.

When white women were not inscribing a deviant sexuality upon the body of black women they relied on “abject rhetorical violence” to subtly punish black women



for refusing to exhibit Mammy's obsequious nature. While these mistresses were not scrutinizing black women through a distinctly sexual lens in the same way Thomas beheld Lurany, they were nonetheless rejecting an unspeakable reality that they could not afford to confront. Mammy surfaces as the medium through which white women ruptured the silence surrounding issues of sexuality, miscegenation, and rape. Stifled by the principles of Southern white womanhood, white women's confrontation with the "magnificently physical" bodies of the black nursemaids and cooks marked their literal encounter with the unspeakable. So, when black women openly rejected their prescribed status, they created a sort of crisis for white women's identity. White women responded to this profound crisis of identity by consciously refusing to name or identify black women's complex humanity and agency. These encounters with the unspeakable, instigated by black women's presumed limitless sexuality, manifested in eruptions of both physical and "abject rhetorical violence."

The noticeably derogatory language peppered throughout the family letters of the Colcock-Jones' clan when referring to black women confirms the use of "abject rhetorical violence" by white women when confronted with black women who refused to embody eager-to-please mammies. That is, "lazy," "impudent," "slow" and "saucy" form the lexicon of disparaging terms the Colcock Jones family piled on black women working within their homes as nursemaids and cooks (Glymph 66). These terms enclose white women's strict maintenance of imaginary boundaries between their slaves. However, white women's exclusive use of these labels for black women also reveal the constant battles enslaved nursemaids and cooks waged against mistresses. Most significant, the

Colcock Jones's family deliberate avoidance of black nursemaids counters the image of the faithful Mammy who was "like one of the family."

Spanning from 1860 through 1868, the Colcock Jones' family letters display an obvious disdain for black nursemaids. When Mary Colcock Jones, the mistress of the wealthy Georgia plantation, writes a letter to her husband detailing her daughter-in-law's trouble finding a nursemaid to care for her newborn child she first expresses her desire "to secure a nurse which will be competent to her business. This will relieve me much, the one we now have is not much removed from an ordinary plantation...If a good nurse is obtained, I will return home immediately" (Myers 538). Mrs. Colcock Jones's request for a "competent" nursemaid entrenches her internalization of black women as pathologically inferior to white women. Although Mrs. Colcock Jones has yet to explicitly mention race in her letter, her hope for a "competent" nurse instead of the "ordinary plantation nurse" exposes her request as a desire for a white nursemaid.

At the root of Mrs. Colcock Jones's preference for a white immigrant nursemaid is the fundamental belief that black women were in desperate need of civilizing. Since mistresses tasked themselves with the duty of showing black women how to become clean and orderly they considered it their mission to raise black women up from the dirty black depths that they inhabited as enslaved black women. Black women's synonymy with laziness and backwardness resulted in white women retaining a dose of contempt for black nursemaids that they did not think to apply to white nursemaids. This logic exemplifies what Black male feminist scholar David Ikard calls "white supremacist pathology" as white women fail to acknowledge the degree to which their enslavement of black women has negatively impacted them for the worse while simultaneously blaming

them for carrying the weight of this burden. White slaveholding women are well aware that slaves are legally prohibited from reading, writing, and learning in general.

Therefore, to disparage a slave for behaving too much like an unenlightened non-person is the height of cognitive dissonance.

When Mrs. Colcock Jones writes to her husband a few days later she explicitly mentions race, making it painstakingly clear that her idea of a “good nurse” is indeed a white one. It is perhaps no surprise that the eventual hiring of this white nursemaid provides tremendous relief to Mrs. Colcock Jones:

This is the first day I have put my feet upon the front steps since I came in; consequently have done no shopping, and there are a few little matters I should like to attend to. Yesterday the black nurse was dismissed, and a very clever white one has taken her place. She is very competent, and I am now relieved of all care of mother and infant, who are doing as well as possible...Last night, we all had uninterrupted sleep, and hope to enjoy the same tonight. (Myers 542)

The “very clever white” nurse quickly restores order where the black nursemaid could not. Whereas Mrs. Jones Colcock attributes her sleeplessness and the disarray of the household to the “ordinary plantation nurse” she has nothing but gratitude for the white nursemaid who seems to have saved the day. But nearly a year later, the Jones Colcock clan replaces this “ordinary plantation nurse” with a black nursemaid whose mere presence creates problems within the household. When Mrs. Colcock Jones receives a letter from her son Charles detailing the current problems he and his wife are having with their black nursemaid. It is not clear what happened to the “very clever white” nursemaid Charles’s

mother praised in her letters just a year ago. Once again, an enslaved black woman named Margaret from another plantation is causing trouble within the Colcock Jones household:

Ruth has been much confined to the house for the past few days in consequence of the discharge of Margaret, and our inability to supply her with a suitable nurse for our dear little Julia. The cause of Margaret's discharge was an *impudent* (emphasis added) manifestation of temper which could not be overlooked. I regretted the occurrence, as she had taken good care of our little infant at all times, and Julia was very fond of her. I wish very much that I could find a competent, reliable nurse. For such a one I am prepared to pay a good price. Very little satisfaction is to be experienced with hired servants. (Myers 592)

Charles's desire for a "competent, reliable nurse" despite of the fact that he admits in his letter that Margaret "had taken good care of the little infant at all times and [the baby] was very fond of her" conceals his own uneasiness with black nursemaids. Mrs. Colcock Jones agrees with her son, conceding that Margaret kept "the little darling [baby] nicely," but she too could not overlook what she deemed to be Margaret's "uncommonly bad temper." This salient disconnect can best be explained as the Colcock Jones's dissatisfaction with Margaret's refusal to adopt a docile manner to make them more comfortable. Margaret is essentially an anti-mammy: her "impudent manifestation of temper" stands in stark contrast to the calm and benevolent Mammy who never dared express anger towards her slave owners. Both Charles and his mother attach a striking militancy to Margaret that makes her appear downright frightening. It is perhaps not an exaggeration or a miscalculation to posit that the Colcock Jones's desire for a white

nursemaid stems from the discomfort Margaret's presence arouses, as they simply cannot control her behavior, let alone her body.

Tryphena Fox, another Southern mistress, directed similar frustrations towards a slave named Susan. Fox routinely described Susan as “impudent & lazy & filthy” (King 73). Like other Southern mistresses, Fox simply could not imagine black women's unhappiness with slavery as anything other than a refusal to accept their rightful place in society. In other words, Fox did not know how to deal with Susan as she deliberately defied the paradigmatic Mammy trope. Susan's presence was a consistent source of befuddlement to Fox:

Perhaps I do not treat her right—probably I do not for I do not like & never did, & I *never shall*; it is not pleasant to live on the same place & in or as close proximity as one is obliged to do with the cook & be all the time at enmity with her & feel angry, whether I say anything or not. (King 107)

Even in appearance Susan refused to fit into the soft and plushy Mammy treasured by whites. Fox defined her as a “great, strong, fat thing” who was “impudent & lazy & filthy” (King 107). One gets the sense from reading Fox's daily interactions with Susan and the other enslaved black women within the household that Fox's frustrations stem largely from her inability to maintain adequate control over them. In her journal, Fox routinely complains that Susan is simply too “slow” and never completes her chores on time (King 107). Susan's rejection of the docile and hardworking mammy cloak, both in appearance and deed, should not be viewed as an exception to the rule, however. Rather Susan's acts of subtle resistance suggest that white women's attempts to etch the

mammy image onto black women were ultimately unsuccessful as black women developed various methods to wrestle against white women's expectations of them.

Indeed, former slaveholder Sarah F. Babb's recollection of her mammy as a woman whose "greatest happiness consisted in a dress of a gay pattern, a bow of ribbon and a green feather in her hair, 'year bobs,' a brass ring, and a strand of beads" rings false in light of Margaret's fiery impudence and Sarah's slovenly manner. Babb's mythical recreation of her mammy shows the desperate measures white women engaged in through their unceasing efforts to write black women into mammydom (Babb 71).

But it is not simply that white women's fond memories of black women affectionately called Mammy bears further scrutiny, however. Instead, the daily battles waged between black and white women categorically denounce white women's perceived innocence in subjugating black women. In a *Grandmother's Recollections of Dixie*, Mary Norcutt Bryan praised her cook Rachel for her culinary proficiency at "preparing savory dishes." For this, Bryan rewarded Rachel with "a weekly allowance of coffee and sugar" when "the poor old woman was an inmate of the Poor House" (Bryan 12). Of her mammy, Bryan fondly recalls: "When Amy, my black mammy died, I was sent for, and mingled my tears along with the dusky mourners about her coffin" (12). Yet Bryan draws a "great contrast" between Amy and her black mammy with the "fat buxom mulatto wench" she encounters after returning home during that "awful reconstruction period." This "fat buxom wench" approaches Bryan, shaking her fist and ordering Bryan off the sidewalk. "Seeing no white person visible," Bryan writes, "and the streets full of negroes...I stepped aside into the gutter and went home. I will not tell what I thought on that occasion" (12). Clearly, Bryan believes that the black woman who accosts her in the

street is an abnormality, a product of the Reconstruction era and negroes failing to know their place with their newly found freedom. Bryan cannot consider the possibility that the Reconstruction period simply allows black women to act on their internal feelings about white women because it deromanticizes the mammy myth and reveals the cruelties of chattel slavery. The cost of seeing black women's reality in this way would force Bryan to forfeit her idealized version of the antebellum south. So Bryan represses these thoughts: "I will not tell what I thought on that occasion." In fact, Bryan cannot bring herself to consider the possibility that Amy and her black mammy would most likely aligned themselves more closely with the black woman in the street if presented with the opportunity. The denigration of the woman in the street as a "fat buxom wench" represents her desperate effort to seize control of the black woman's body by castigating her via language that both sexualizes and denigrates her.

For white women then, the collapse of the Southern planter aristocracy signaled the appalling emergence of black women who no longer knew their place as faithful mummies. With Union troops closing in, Mary Chestnut remained troubled by the actions of her friend's former nursemaid. A baffled and obviously hurt Chestnut wrote, "The Martins left Columbia the Friday before I did. And their mammy, the negro woman who had nursed them, refused to go with them. That daunted me" (715). Here, Chestnut comes face to face with unspeakable realities: Did Mammy ever truly love the white people she served? Did Mammy have an interior life beyond the kitchens of white people and their children? These questions prove confounding for Chestnut. Still, she goes no further in her musings, sidestepping the implications of this revelation because of the devastating impact it could have on her carefully constructed notions of delicate white womanhood.

But the violent encounters between enslaved black women and their mistresses, readily apparent in white women's diaries and letters, prove that the plantation household was a virtual hotbed for tensions between white and black women.

As shown throughout this chapter, mistresses were clearly active participants in the state-sanctioned violence against black women. Exposing this reality is crucial to understanding how the Cult of True Womanhood accommodated and strengthened white women's cruel acts of terror against slave women on the plantation. The oral narratives of enslaved black women yield precious insight into white women's uses of violence to police enslaved black women's sexuality. Fannie Moore, an enslaved black woman from South Carolina, routinely endured beatings not from her master's wife, but from her master's mother, Granny Moore. The nature of Granny Moore's beatings of other enslaved black women on the plantation reveal the degree to which white women exercised total control over black women's bodies. When Granny Moore learned that a slave woman named Aunt Cheney had resisted the overseer's sexual advances she ordered "Aunt Cheney to de kitchen and [made] her take her clothes off den she beat her til she jes black an' blue" (Moore 128). Granny Moore's brutal beating of Aunt Cheney reiterates Aunt Cheney's body as one entirely beholden to white women and men alike. Moreover, Granny Moore's assertion of power bolsters up her enduring ties to the patriarchal planter class as her violent behavior towards Aunt Cheney makes visible the violent struggle white women engaged in to preside over black women's bodies. Former slave George King remembered his mistress assisting the overseer with binding and tying his mother's wrists and "pulling his mammy's clothes over her head so's the lash could reach the skin" (165-6). Although the overseer applied the whip to his mother's body,



King seemed particularly disturbed by the unabated pleasure his mistress enjoyed while she witnessed his mother's beating: "He saw the Mistress walk away, laughing, while his Mammy screamed and groaned" (165-6). King's mistress's barbarous laughter exhibits the same heartless attitude displayed by the mistress in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as she eagerly awaits the chance to see the blood flow down Nanny's heels.

Equally disturbing, Granny Moore's beating of Aunt Cheney also reveals the extent to which white women's misreading of black women's bodies as monstrously sexual prevented them from acknowledging black women as victims of rape. In effect, white women deployed what Saidaya Hartman terms the "discourse of seduction" in leveling the blame for their husbands' rape of black women solely at the feet of wicked black women. White women, by making the enslaved black woman the "master of her own subjection," were in complete agreement with their husbands whose reliance on nineteenth century legal codes recognized the slave as a subject only within the context of criminality (Hartman 82). Mirroring the way white men exploited black women's bodies for their own sexual gratification, white women transposed lewd carnality onto black women in an effort to shield themselves from the truth of their sexually predatory husbands. More than this, white women waged war on black women's bodies because these darker bodies lodged a vast sexuality that endangered their own sense of sovereignty. White women also understood black women as competitors over white male access and power. As the master's feelings for Nanny in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* suggest, some of the relationships between white men and black women became quite strong—sex is only one element of this warped affair.

Casting a spotlight on white women as tormentors, predators, and active agents in the sexual exploitation of enslaved black men and women restructures the traditional plantation script. As Foster points out, “Few scholars... have viewed the relationships of enslaved men and free white women through the lens of sexual abuse in part because of gendered assumptions about sexual power” (Foster 459). While the conservative nature of the antebellum south makes it difficult to imagine white women as sexual predators, historian Elizabeth Fox-Genovese argues “slaveholding culture emphasized control of female sexuality; it did not deny its existence” (236). Thus, there is evidence that white women, even under the conventional pressures of an antebellum Christian society, did indeed exercise their right to sexually possess black men’s bodies.

While plantation mistresses were largely conceived as “prisoners in disguise,” the stories of enslaved black men tell a vastly different story (Clinton 145). In his 1837 autobiography, former slave Charles Ball describes meeting “the daughter of a wealthy planter, in one of the lower counties of Georgia” who had given birth to a mixed-race son. The family considered sending her out of state until the birth, but instead “the girl was kept in her father’s house, until the birth of her child, which she was not permitted to nurse; it being taken from her” (Ball 311). According to Captain Richard J. Hinton, an abolitionist commander in the Civil War, “I have never found a bright-looking colored man, whose confidences I have won... who has not told me of instances where he has been compelled, either by his mistress, or by white women of the same class, to have connection with them” (qtd. in Hodes 130).

Although paltry, the existing evidence of white women's sexual abuse of black men nonetheless gets us to begin considering how white women exerted their power over black women via sexual exploitation.<sup>4</sup> This is a decidedly difficult path of inquiry to consider as the layers of taboo surrounding white women's sexuality utterly confounds the issue. However, I have attempted to insert both black and white women's sexuality back into the narrative to at least shift the discourse away from notions of shared subjugation between white and black women to the dangerous power white women wielded against their black women with impunity. As we will see in the following chapters, white women's access to power via the enslaved black woman's body gives way to a kind of boundless and barbarous sexual exploitation that literally stands outside the lexicographical framework of sexual abuse.

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<sup>4</sup> Foster, Thomas A. "The Sexual Abuse of Black Men under American Slavery." *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 20 no 3. (September 2011): 445-464. Print. Foster's exploration of white men's sexual abuse of enslaved black men confirms that slaveholder's exploitative desires crossed male heterosexual boundaries.

## Chapter Two:

### “Free as She Was Going to Be”: Spaces of Subversion in Alice Randall’s *The Wind Done Gone*



Figure 1: *The Sugar Baby* (Courtesy of the New York Times)

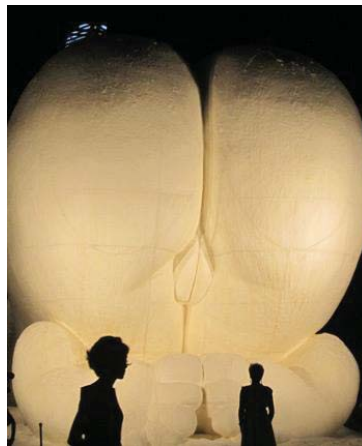


Figure 2: *The Sugar Baby* (Courtesy of the New York Times)

When Kara Walker’s “A Subtlety or the Marvelous Sugar Baby” premiered in May 2014 at the Domino Sugar Factory in Brooklyn, throngs of spectators flocked to see the artist’s work.<sup>5</sup> Although Walker’s exhibit featured ceramic boys made of molasses-colored candy, the sheer enormity of the 75.5 feet long, 35.5 tall and 26 feet wide *Sugar Baby* commanded visitors’ unflinching attention. *Sugar Baby*’s gigantic breasts, areolas, and vulva invited visitors’ admiration. Lying flat on all fours, *Sugar Baby*’s body takes

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<sup>5</sup> I have chosen to shorten the title for stylistic purposes. The full title is “A Subtlety or the Marvelous Sugar Baby, an Homage to the unpaid and overworked Artisans who have refined our Sweet tastes from the cane fields to the Kitchens of the New World on the Occasion of the demolition of the Domino Sugar Refining Plant.”

on an animalistic quality as “her behind is lifted up in an offering position” (Loichot). Yet, if the *Sugar Baby*’s raised rear end invites viewers’ gaze it also rejects this voyeuristic gaze as she can be seen as quite literally exposing and giving visitors her behind to kiss. And, as Hilton Als observes, there is an overriding sense of ambiguity in the sculpture’s posture as “the sphinx’s left hand is configured in such a way that it connotes good luck, or “fuck you,” or “fertility” (Hilton, “The Sugar Sphinx”). It is the paradoxical nature of the sculpture that, despite its monstrous size and blinding whiteness, imbues the *Sugar Baby* with a touch of humanity. Indeed, one viewer described the competing incongruities lodged within the sculpture as the source of its alluring power: “She is so exposed and she’s so vulnerable, but at the same time she has some grace and majesticness [sic] that is completely unapproachable” (Cornish, “Artist Kara Walker Draws Us Into Bitter History With Something Sweet”). Walker herself noted the humanistic vivacity emanating from the sculpture:

“What we’re seeing, for lack of a better term, is the head of a woman who has very African, black features. She sits somewhere in between the kind of mammy figure of old and something a little bit more recognizable — recognizably human. ... [She has] very full lips; high cheekbones; eyes that have no eyes, [that] seem to be either looking out or closed; and a kerchief on her head. She’s positioned with her arms flat out across the ground and large breasts that are staring at you.” (Cornish, “Artist Kara Walker Draws Us Into Bitter History With Something Sweet”)

Clearly, as Walker explains, the *Sugar Baby* draws on the notorious Mammy archetype. But what Walker calls “recognizably human” is the sculpture’s renunciation of the

grinningly empty faces of Mammy so prominently displayed on syrup bottles and pancake boxes. The *Sugar Baby* frees herself from the weight of this paralyzing white supremacist history by showing the amazing contradictions and ambiguities of the human spirit. This chapter, then, utilizes the touch of humanity Walker instills into the archetypically benevolent and bland Mammy figure as an entry point for examining *The Wind Done Gone*'s reconstruction of Mammy as a woman wholly aware of her sexuality. The smoldering erotic power that Walker lodges within the Sugar Baby's raised buttocks and giant vulva embodies the sensual subjectivity that Alice Randall imbues Mammy with in her 2001 novel, *The Wind Done Gone*. Although Walker and Randall utilize different genres to convey their point, they are both involved in the similar project of considering the emancipatory power of enslaved black women's erotic resistance.

*The Wind Done Gone* recreates Mitchell's Tara by introducing Tata plantation as a space where the enslaved black men and women battle their white masters at every turn. Cynara, Scarlett's black half-sister, takes center stage. Predictably, *The Wind Done Gone*'s focus on Cynara and her mother, Mammy, initiated a storm of controversy. The Margaret Mitchell estate promptly sued Houghton Mifflin for copyright infringement. Legal scholars monitored the case closely for its free speech implications. Public court case aside, Alice Randall's novel has been largely dismissed outright as a bland retelling of *Gone with the Wind*. In her review, Teresa K. Weaver concludes that "without a solid grounding in Margaret Mitchell's characters and plot, Randall's book would be nearly incomprehensible. Or at least meaningless" (Weaver, "*Wind Done Gone* Short on Freshness, Humor"). Admittedly, Randall described her novel an attempt to "explode" the myths propagated by Mitchell's master text (Interview). However, even critics

assigning merit to *The Wind Done Gone* primarily praise the novel for supplanting notions of white patriarchal power and “recirculating it within an economy of black ascent” (Romine 52). But perspectives such as these tacitly suggest that *The Wind Done Gone* is a largely ahistorical fantasy that serves as palliative for blacks pained by Margaret Mitchell’s embarrassing portrayal of blacks. Literary critic Thomas Haddox argues this precise point in his analysis of *The Wind Done Gone* as a text that sacrifices historical accuracy in order to present an alternate history that “stresses the importance of a positive representation of African Americans at the expense of a tougher engagement with history” (52). But discounting *The Wind Done Gone* as wistful and fanciful jaunt through one of the most horrific periods of African American and American history seems to minimize the import of the text and, more importantly, overlook the ways in which *The Wind Done Gone* remains firmly entrenched in black women’s sordid and violent sexual legacies. What gets lost in relegating *The Wind Done Gone* to literary placebo is a substantive investigation into how Randall manages to imbue Mammy with something so recognizably and distinctly human that Mammy moves beyond the bounds of archetype to embody a kind of three-dimensional complexity long denied and withheld from black women in the popular white imagination.

*The Wind Done Gone*, then, to borrow a common African American vernacular expression, ain’t your mama’s slave narrative. That is, the novel’s firm grounding in the neo-slave narrative tradition clarifies Randall’s revising of history as a means of revealing the spaces of subversion enslaved black women carved out for themselves in spite of their sexual oppression. It is not simply that Randall is presenting us with an African American version of events, but that she is telling the messier story that black

women could not tell not only because of their enslaved status, but because of the strict modes of decorum regulating antebellum society. With its bevy of sex-laden scenes, Randall's text punctures the wall of silence enslaved black women purposefully erected in their slave narratives. Censored by white authenticators dedicated to absolving white men of culpability in black women's rape, enslaved black women routinely shrouded their sexual abuse in a veil of secrecy. In *Incidents in the Life of Slave Girl*, Harriet Jacobs confessed that her narrative could never fully capture the magnitude of her sexual exploitation: "The degradation, the wrongs, the vices, that grow out of slavery, are more than I can describe" (45). *The Wind Done Gone* casts this veil off through its tangle of interracial and incestuous sexual affairs. In an interview, Randall recalled the nagging thought that she could not shake after reading *Gone with the Wind*: "Where are the mulattoes on Tara?" ("Houghton Mifflin Interview with Alice Randall"). Randall's preoccupation with miscegenation is readily apparent in Cynara's relationship with R, Mammy's sex with Planter, and Dreamy Gentlemen's obsession with Miss Priss's brother. Casting a spotlight on the daily instances of enslaved black women's sexual exploitation, *The Wind Done Gone* urges a reevaluation of the complex sexual dilemmas compelling black women to work as active participants in their own subjugation. To be clear, the imbalance of power between enslaved women and their masters and mistresses placed severe constraints on black women's ability to maneuver outside the field of white power. Thus, black women understood the potential for sexuality to be wielded as a weapon to exert some degree of agency in situations of extreme disempowerment.

Randall brings this issue to the fore via her exploration of Mammy's interior sex life. In her insightful *Mammy: A Century of Race, Gender, and Southern Memory*,



Kimberly Wallace Sanders credits Randall for “pursuing some of Mammy’s more enigmatic qualities” but ultimately withholds praise for the novel since “Mammy’s life story is not central enough to significantly free her by the end of the novel” (140). But this seems precisely the import of *The Wind Done Gone*: Mammy’s inability to liberate herself mirrors the quandaries actual enslaved black women faced in attempting to extricate themselves from the systematic and sustained sexual abuse they suffered at the hands of their slave masters. As historian Drew Gilpin Faust points out, “Perhaps the most striking aspect of white intrusion into black family life was the sexual interference of masters, overseers, and even day laborers with slave women”(86). Randall, too, focuses on this matter in *The Wind Done Gone*, as the text is overwhelmingly concerned with inserting black women’s sexuality back into the historical record. More specifically, *The Wind Done Gone*’s depiction of Mammy as a woman who fashions her sexuality into a tool for attaining a measure of agency infuses humanity into one of the most troubling and pathological images of black womanhood.

This is not an undertaking that Randall strikes out against alone—black women writers and Black Feminist scholars have long battled against this notorious white supremacist trope. In her Pulitzer Prize winning novel *Beloved*, Toni Morrison offers up an antidote to the troubling Mammy image through Baby Suggs. On the surface, Baby Suggs’s advanced age and seemingly subservient attitude align her with the benevolent and asexual Mammy archetype. But Morrison repeated lodging of Baby Suggs’s resistance within her corporeal and sexual body detaches Baby Suggs from the white supremacist trope. When Mr. Garner attempts to carve subservience onto Baby Suggs she

shows that, even at her advanced age, she is wholly unashamed of the sexual dimensions of her body:

“You got married, Jenny? I didn’t know it.”

“Manner of speaking.”

“You know where he is, this husband?”

“No, sir.”

“Why you call him Suggs, then? His bill of sale says Whitlow too, just like yours.”

“Suggs is my name, sir. From my husband. He didn’t call me Jenny.”

“What he call you?”

“Baby.”

“Well,” said Mr. Garner, going pink again, “if I was you I’d stick to Jenny Whitlow. Mrs. Baby Suggs ain’t no name for a freed Negro.” (Morrison

142)

In refusing to call herself the name on her bill of sale—Jenny Whitlow—Baby Suggs rejects her master’s authorial power to name her. But even more, Baby Suggs asserts herself as a human being worthy of her “husband’s” love and the right to experience pleasure. In effect, Baby Suggs repels Mr. Garner’s attempt to strip her of sexuality. *The Wind Done Gone* is engaged in a similar literary project as Morrison’s *Beloved*, since Randall reworks the Mammy trope to incriminate white men as linchpin undergirding the erasure of black women’s sexuality.

Although *The Wind Done Gone* sounds the death knell for the asexual Mammy, Randall’s housing of sexuality within Mammy is fraught with complications due to the

conditions under which Mammy exercises her sexual agency. When Mammy slips into Planter's room and "give[s] him what he wanted in his bed" the novel raises questions about black women's ability to consent in the master-slave dyad (Randall 61). Or, in other words, constructing Mammy as the aggressor recasts her as the licentious black woman responsible for seducing her innocent master with her erotic charm. Portraying Mammy as seductress runs the risk of minimizing enslaved black women's sexual exploitation and absolving white men of all culpability by pinning the blame on sexually deviant black women. The brazen quality of Mammy's actions makes it difficult to conceive of this sexual encounter as rape or exploitation since she is the one who "gives it so good that Planter never complains" (Randall 61). In attempting to dismantle the stereotypically fat and unattractive Mammy of white supremacist imaginings it seems that Randall inadvertently engraves another equally damaging pathology onto Mammy. This odd coupling between master and slave is even more baffling because Randall never makes clear as to why Mammy initiates a sexual relationship with her master. In fact, Mammy's actions produce a score of issues that *The Wind Done Gone* never fully resolves: How long does this relationship last? Why does Mammy initiate contact with Planter in the first place? And, is she always the initiator?<sup>6</sup> Yet that *The Wind Done Gone* does not explicitly disclose Mammy's intentions for sleeping with Planter alludes to the countless omissions peppering enslaved black women's narratives. The task of connecting the dots and uncovering the specifics about black women's sexual exploitation has largely been the work of scholars and historians. Randall assigns her readers with a similar task by encouraging them to fill in these gaps. Even more, Garlic's

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<sup>6</sup> Kimberly Wallace-Sanders considers these similar questions in *Mammy: A Century of Race, Gender and Southern Memory*.

portrayal of Mammy as a woman who “gives it so good that Planter never complains” strongly implies that Mammy takes pleasure in her sexual prowess and in her ability to keep her master satisfied. As third-wave black feminists have consistently argued, there is not only power to be found in using one’s sexuality as a tool for personal gain, but pleasure. Randall’s rendering of Mammy introduces the idea of enslaved black women as fully sexualized subjects who understood the emancipatory power of their sexuality.

Stitching together the bits and pieces of Mammy’s life reveal her as a conscientious woman acutely aware of sex’s functioning as commodity within a white supremacist patriarchal network of power. In his seminal “Black Bodies, White Bodies,” Sander Gillman outlined the phenomena by which the black servant’s “central functions in the visual arts of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was to sexualize the society in which he or she is found” (209). That Mammy knows that her black and female body is being read as a virtual psychological playground for “illicit sexual activity” suggests that she is also imbued with a sense of double-consciousness that not only informs her perspective on the world around her, but ensures her survival in the radically raced and sexed space that she inhabits (Gillman 209). Understanding how she is perceived in the plantation system, Mammy can then develop a plan for survival.

Garlic, Mammy’s lover and another slave on the Tata plantation, confirms Mammy’s shrewd decision making: “If Lady married a man on a lonely place, a man with no people, Pallas could run the place, and she’d be free, free as she was going to be” (Randall 60). Although she is Lady’s slave and therefore bound to her mistress, Mammy nonetheless understands that true power resides within the white male body. Attaining a modicum of autonomy necessitates Mammy’s forming of an alliance with Planter, not

Lady. There are significant drawbacks to this uneasy union, however. Mammy must make herself invaluable to her master by offering him the only commodity available to her: sex. Enslaved black women's utilization of sex to make their lives better is a recurrent theme in slave narratives. When Harriet Jacobs sleeps with a Southern white man named Mr. Sands she does so as a means of thwarting Dr. Flint's repeated attempts to rape her: "It seems less degrading to give one's self, than to submit to compulsion" (55). It would be a stretch of the imagination to classify Jacobs's actions as a choice made of her own volition. However, the nature of Jacobs's oppression forces her to seize upon the first opportunity she can to elude Dr. Flint. Recent scholarship suggests that Mr. Sands is not only complicit in the exploitation of black bodies, but that he also operates as a sexual predator who targets Jacobs because of her desperation.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, investigating Mammy's interior life through the lens of subjugation exposes the paradoxical taint of her actions. As Saidiya Hartman explains in *Scenes of Subjection*, "The purportedly binding passions of master-slave relations were predicated upon the inability of the enslaved to exercise her will in any ways other than serving the master, and in this respect, she existed only as an extension or embodiment of the owner's rights of property" (82). Enslaved black women's triple oppression, hinging on their race, gender, and their disfranchised slave status, effectively curtails any legitimate claims to autonomy. Mammy's circumscribed position parallels the very real predicament Jacobs details in *Incidents*. Like Jacobs, Mammy makes a calculated gamble to sleep with

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<sup>7</sup> Hopkins, Patricia D. "Seduction or Rape: Deconstructing the Black Female Body in Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*." *Making Connections: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Cultural Diversity* 13:1 (2011): 6-7. Print.

Hopkins reconsiders Mr. Sands's dealings with Jacobs through the lens of exploitation on par with that of Dr. Flint's evil designs.

Planter in a move that she stands to lose more from than gain. Garlic standing “right outside the door in case things didn’t go right” emphasizes the riskiness of Mammy’s endeavor since Planter has the authority to torpedo Mammy’s plan should he simply choose to do so (Randall 61). Although he does not exercise brute force at any point in the novel, Planter is nonetheless vested in the system of plantation slavery relegating black women’s worth to their ability to service their masters and mistresses with labor and sex. Under the system of slavery every slave owner, no matter how benevolent, remains complicit in the exploitation of black bodies.

The height of Planter’s slaveholding power is most evident when he sells his illegitimate daughter, Cynara, because she is beginning to distract Mammy from her work. In a letter requesting that his brother buy Cynara for a good price, Planter reduces the selling of another human being—his daughter no less—to a mere transaction by cautioning his brother to “manage the thing right” (Randall 36). Planter’s dispassionate tone makes Cynara feel as if she has been “kilt” (Randall 36). In her diary, Cynara succinctly sums up Planter’s disdain for black lives: “At the end of every day Planter counted his money, his acres, and his slaves. All that counted were the acres” (Randall 36). Planter’s decision to casually sever the maternal link between mother and daughter confirms his inculcation of white supremacist notions maligning black mothers as breeders. Further, the ease with which Planter sells Cynara highlights the havoc slaves masters, even those considered generous, wreaked on enslaved black women’s lives on a whim. As Harriet Jacobs explains in one particularly poignant passage, “You never knew what it is to be a slave; to be entirely unprotected by law or custom; to have the laws reduce you to the condition of a chattel, entirely subject to the will of another” (Jacobs

86). Cynara's likening of the enslaved's black woman's unfortunate fate to death parallels Orlando Patterson's explanation of slavery as a "social death" in which the slave exists only in a state of "total powerlessness" (3).

It is *The Wind Done Gone*'s display of Planter's ability to render black women utterly powerless that more clearly legitimizes the novel's rootedness in enslaved black women's uniquely gendered experiences of exploitation. In one particularly disturbing scene, a jealous rage washes over Cynara as she watches Other march up to Mammy, tug at her dress, and demand that Mammy let her suckle at her breast. The visual that Randall creates emphasizes the everyday acts of violence affecting the bodies and psyches of enslaved black women:

The rosebud mouth attached to the black moon in the brown breast, the curving back of the loving woman lifting the child to her pleasures, as the child, awake, untouched by stays and hoops, stands on tippy-toe to get her fill of pleasure, all raven-haired and unashamed of hunger. [Planter] laughed. For his first-born daughter the pangs of hunger were as delightful as a mosquito bite, something to scratch in the next moment, the promise of pleasure to come. He didn't see me hiding behind Lady's skirts or see the look Mammy gave me over Other's head. Planter only saw his daughter taking pleasure where he himself had done. (13)

Randall paints a truly harrowing picture of the dysfunction emerging from within the plantation household. The quotidian aspect of this scene only thinly conceals its absolute perversity. For here is a small white child greedily suckling her black mammy's milk while Mammy remains incapable of comforting her own child who is witnessing this

scene by peeking from behind her mistress's skirts. Both Mammy and Cynara are conscripts to violence enacted upon them by slave master and, albeit tiny, mistress. The debilitating impact of bearing witness to this violence nearly shatters Cynara, as she experiences a profound sense of loss watching her mother bend to the will of a child: "I ached in some place I didn't know I had, where my heart should have but wasn't" (Randall 13). The poignancy of Cynara's words gives a voice to the enslaved black children seemingly forgotten and abandoned because their mothers were forced to care for the master's children first. Denied her mother's touch, Cynara longs for the comfort of her mother's breasts but instead absorbs the blow of her mother's involuntary neglect.

Planter standing, like a pious god, at the center of it all smiles and takes pride in his work, saying: "My peculiar heaven, my peculiar, particular heaven" (Randall 14). Clearly, Mammy's subjugation forms the bedrock of Planter's pleasure. It comes as no surprise that Planter's sadomasochistic appetite is sated by his young daughter's authority to take possession of Mammy's body whenever the moment strikes her. In fact, Other's absolute command of Mammy's body directly mirrors Planter's ability to possess Mammy's body on a moment's notice.

Planter's desire for Mammy, fueled at the sight of her breastfeeding his child, draws attention yet again to the question of whether Mammy continues initiating contact with Planter or if the dynamic, at some point in their relationship, shifts. Simply put, if Mammy "gave it so good" to Planter, why would he voluntarily cut off sexual relations with her? Why would he need to? In fact, there are telltale signs that Planter eventually exercises the full benefits entitled to him as a slave master. Mammy's purposeful



shielding of her body with mounds of fat suggests that Mammy surrenders the lithe body of her youth as a means of hindering Planter's attempts to possess her body:

Mammy gained fifty pounds one year, forty the next, twenty the year after that, and the slight, barely hundred-pound body in which she had walked into the house and slipped into Planter's bed vanished beneath another hundred pounds of protective flesh....Overnight, Mammy became a stout old woman of fifty. (Randall 101)

Drawing from black counterculture, Mammy's corporeal maneuvering contests the traditionally fat black Mammy archetype. The historical trajectory of fat black women's bodies within the national imagination etches deviance upon their bodies. It is this historical legacy that Mammy pulls from to potentially repel Planter's desire. In *Fat Black Women's Unruly Political Bodies*, Andrea Shaw outlines the marginal spaces that fat black women occupy within Western standards of beauty and desire:

Performing triple duty as an inverse signifier, the fat black woman's body is triply removed from the West's conceptualization of normalcy and situated beyond the outskirts of normative boundaries, which makes its incorporation into the body politic an impossible undertaking. (7)

Although this triple oppression is typically injurious to black women in more ways than one, Mammy makes her flesh work for her. Mammy inverts the white supremacist trope so that her fleshly body forms the core of her resistance. No longer is her portly body a source of comfort for mistress and master; it is a weapon that she utilizes to secure her own safety. And yet Mammy's weaponizing of her flesh does not, it appears, dissuade Planter from continuing to enjoy a sexual affair with Mammy. *The Wind Done Gone*

makes this crucial but implicit point: Fat black women's position as cultural outsiders did not, in any way, preclude the possibility of their sexual violation. Several key clues in the text suggest that Mammy's rapid weight gain fails to protect her from Planter. When Planter sells Cynara she asks him to explain why he calls her "cinnamon" and Mammy "coffee." Planter's explanation indicates a stubborn refusal to part with Mammy because of her ability to fulfill his sexual needs: "I mean a man can do without his cinnamon but he can't do without his coffee" (Randall 4). Even more, Planter's repeated linking of Mammy to "his coffee" suggests that he regularly enjoys sipping from his cup of coffee.

Garlic's short-lived relationship with Mammy also incriminates Planter as the wedge that eventually drove them apart. Recounting the details of Mammy's life to Cynara, Garlic recalls his initial happiness upon learning of Mammy's pregnancy due to his belief that Cynara was his baby: "First, you was coming, I hoped you were my baby. But then you came with what dey called peridot green eyes" (Randall 59). Although the details of Garlic's relationship with Mammy are scant, their pairing seems one borne out of mutual respect. But Garlic's decision to marry another woman on the plantation shortly after Cynara's birth alludes to Planter's lingering presence in Mammy's interior sex life. Still, Mammy's relationship with both Planter and Garlic restructures her as an unquestionably sexual being. This is yet another instance where Randall breathes humanity into Mammy by representing her as a woman ensnared between lover and master. This precarious position that Mammy finds herself in stresses the fact the gambles enslaved black women made rarely, if ever, paid off. In the end, Mammy cannot stop Planter from selling her daughter. Nor can she stop him from interfering in her love life. In short, Mammy is the loser of a game that her subjugated status forces her to

initiate. As historian Catherine Clinton writes, “The deals were one-sided, the risks higher, the lottery rigged. Yet slave women gambled, driven by desperation” (210). Mammy, like so many enslaved black women, takes the plunge in the hopes of attaining a slightly better life.

Randall’s novel, therefore, does more than challenge Mitchell’s romanticized and idyllic version of the south. *The Wind Done Gone* is the mechanism by which Randall explores the myriad forms of resistance enslaved black women enacted against their slave masters. Still, detaching *The Wind Done Gone* from the long shadow cast by *Gone with the Wind* is perhaps an impossible task. Even the presiding judge of the SunTrust v. Houghton Mifflin suit could not hide his unhappiness at the fact that Scarlett dies in *The Wind Done Gone*: “I guess what really troubles me is killing off Miss Scarlett” (“Transcript of Hearing before the Honorable Charles A. Pannell, March 29, 2001”). While the critical reception of *The Wind Done Gone* reduces it to a burlesque lampooning of Mitchell’s classic novel, the alacrity with which the Mitchell estate sued Houghton Mifflin suggests that the novel is no laughing matter. In fact, the terms of the settlement dictating that Randall’s novel be published with a bright red sticker labeling it an “unauthorized parody” represents an attempt to banish the very real testimonies of enslaved black women’s sexual exploitation into the realm of comedy. Randall challenges this muzzling, in a move paralleling Walker’s massive Sugar Baby sculpture, by excavating the voices of enslaved black women forced to negotiate their sexuality within the confines of oppression. Explaining the purpose behind her work, Walker articulated her desire to “get a grasp on history...it’s about race when it’s kind of about this larger concern of being” (Cornish, “Artist Kara Walker Draws Us Into Bitter History

With Something Sweet”). Both Walker and Randall are involved in the project of restoring black women’s complex humanity by penetrating the sordid depths of history. Perhaps critics and scholars alike will eventually look upon *The Wind Done Gone* with an appreciation for the contradictory yet noticeably human element of Mammy in much the same way viewers championed the subversive beauty of Walker’s *Sugar Baby*.

### **Chapter Three: “It Appeal to Me”: The Swerve Ethos in Valerie Martin’s *Property***

First Lady Michelle Obama ignited a virtual firestorm of controversy when Speaker of the House John Boehner attempted to engage her with witty banter at the 2013 Inaugural luncheon. Without even saying a word and barely looking up from her meal, Obama rolled her eyes at Boehner. For a number of Black Americans watching this exchange, Obama’s nonverbal, bodily communication—and specifically the rolling of her eyes—sent a clear message of her extreme dissatisfaction with Boehner. In fact, Obama’s facial expression, posture, and subtle contortions of her body was quite familiar to many a Black viewer. On Twitter, Black users lauded Obama’s “side-eye” as “epic” (Ajayi). For NewsOne, the black-owned news website, Obama had performed an “Executive Side-Eye” (NewsOne “Presidential Shade: Michelle Obama Rolls Her Eyes at Boehner”). As the name suggests, the “side-eye” is typically performed by lowering one’s eyes and peering out at the person from the corners of one’s eyes. The praise Black viewers heaped on Obama speaks to the visual rebuke’s rootedness in a coded look of Black nonverbal self-expression. Indeed, the vaunted “side-eye” spans the African Diaspora. In Guyana and Jamaica, the “cut-eye” operates as a visual assault which “cuts” up another person by looking them up and down (Rickford 299). In Haitian culture, the term for this phenomenon is “couper yeux” which translates “to cut (or cutting) the eyes” (Rickford 299). While the “side-eye” certainly operates as a visual expression of disgust, disapproval, displeasure, or hostility, it also contains an element of satirical humor since the goal of the look is to render the recipient a fool who cannot be trusted. In fact, the “side-eye” is very much a performance in which the actor attempts to elicit laughter from members within the community.

Although mainstream media picked up on the air of disapproval entrenched within Obama's nonverbal expression, reporters missed the nuances of the look, whittling Obama's "side-eye" down to "a moment of questionable body language" (Whitaker, "Michelle Obama's Eye Roll: Was She Throwing Shade?"). For black viewers, however, witnessing the most prominent woman in the nation, if not the world, employ a uniquely Black cultural code of expression to dismiss Boehner (and by extension a majority white GOP who consistently and openly flaunted its disdain for the nation's first black president) was culturally affirmative in immeasurable ways. Indeed, it further solidified Obama's iconic status in black spaces as the unapologetically black "sista" from the Southside of Chicago who did not suffer fools, including the most powerful white men in the world. For my more specific purposes, Obama's "side-eye" opens up a theoretical space for considering how enslaved black women and men negotiated their humanity by "checking" their mistresses and masters with a series of unequivocally Black looks and phrases.

At every turn, enslaved black women and men defied white authority. Although this historical pattern of resistance is perhaps most apparent in the large-scale rebellions planned by the likes of Gabriel Prosser and Nat Turner, enslaved black men and women devised countless acts of resistance to improve their everyday lives. When the Jamaican born Sabrina Park was brought to trial for killing her three-month old child, she cited her decision to kill the child as a choice that simultaneously spared her child from the horrors of slavery and denied enslavers the opportunity to freely exploit her child for unpaid labor, saying that "she had worked enough for buckra already and would not be plagued to raise the child to work for white people" (Dadzie 30). Whether shirking away from

work by hiding in the woods, beating incorrigible Negro-slave breakers, or hiding in a cramped attic for seven years, enslaved black men and women developed unique strategies to combat their enslavers.<sup>8</sup> As Stephanie M. Camp's *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* proves, black women carved out areas for creative self-expression through seemingly mundane acts of dying their plain and dull burlap material into bright and vibrant colors to "make it fancy" (qtd. in Camp 81). And yet, enslaved black women's and men's resistance cannot be confined to outward displays of rebellion. In fact, enslaved black men and women sometimes performed nonverbal and verbal acts that their white oppressors could not fully comprehend despite perceiving the air of open disrespect lodged within these looks and acts.

For many slave masters and mistresses, the act of looking was viewed with such suspicion that masters and mistresses did not hesitate to beat their slaves for it. In *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Douglass writes that "Mr. Hopkins could always find some excuse for whipping a slave. A mere look, word, or motion—a mistake, or accident—are all, things for which a slave could be whipped" (111-12). Although Douglass describes the master's beating of slaves for a "mere look" as an excuse for the master to inflict pain on black bodies, it seems that the master understood, on some level, that enslaved black men and women were openly defying their masters through the simple act of looking. In *Black Looks*, bell hooks calls this defiant look the "oppositional gaze." As hooks points out, the "gaze" has long been "a site of resistance for colonized

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<sup>8</sup> Here, I allude to Frederick Douglass's infamous battle with Mr. Covey and to the seven years Harriet Jacobs spends sequestered in her grandmother's tiny attic so that she might be closer to her children.

black people globally”(116). The transformative element of this “oppositional gaze” is grounded in the looker’s ability to claim and cultivate an awareness by “look[ing] a certain way in order to resist” (116). Looking, then, becomes a pronouncement of self-assertion: “Not only will I stare. I want my look to change reality” (hooks 116). The “side-eye”—which Obama so deftly employs—is simply the latest version of Black non-verbal and verbal expressions of resistance. I define the distinctive yet elusive array of Black looks and idioms centering on dismissing, rebuking, or “checking” adversaries as the “swerve ethos.”

Although “swerve” has a number of meanings within the African American vernacular, I rely on its more recent definition as a means of embarrassing opponents by encouraging them to either physically walk away, or “swerve” away from a point of conversation that the speaker no longer deems relevant. More broadly speaking, the “swerve ethos” best embodies the gaggle of Black phrases and nonverbal looks which all share the similar purpose of dismissing one’s opponent with such aplomb that the insult goes virtually undetected by those outside of the community.

In connecting these looks and phrases to a larger structure of Black cultural attitudes, I am not laying claim to a new lingua franca of black resistance but expanding how we understand and “read” the complex and manifold modes of black non-verbal and verbal forms of expression. As early as 1962, noted anthropologist and linguist Roger D. Abrahams labeled the set of rhetorical devices utilized by Black people to “imply, goad, beg, boast, by *indirect* verbal or gestural means” as signifyin(g) (260). Scholar Henry Louis Gates expounded on this black trope in his analysis of African American literature in *The Signifying Monkey*. Thus, both Abrahams’s and Gates’s incisive analyses on black



rhetorical strategies illuminates black people's lengthy battle for devising creative ways to push back against white terrorism in ways wholly indiscernible to white audiences. In many ways, the "swerve ethos" builds on and expands the critical framework of signifying to include more recent terms within the Black vernacular. "Reading" and "shade"—a blunt insult designed to point out or cast "shade" on another person's flaws—grew out of the African American and Latino gay and transgender ball culture in New York City.<sup>9</sup> While the "side-eye" is associated with and perhaps best performed by Black women, "mean mugging," or staring at another person with an open look of hatred stems largely from an African American male braggadocio that can be a precursor to physical violence. Despite the different cultural nuances of each particular look and phrase comprising the "swerve ethos," these codes of resistance exemplify the distinctive form of coded communication within African American communities.

In this chapter, I examine how Sarah, the enslaved black woman in Valerie Martin's *Property*, deploys this tactic to render her mistress as a fool. Set on a Louisiana sugar plantation in 1828, *Property* centers on Manon, wife of the plantation owner, Gaudet. However, much of the tension in Martin's novel pivots on Manon's hatred for Sarah, the enslaved black woman whom Manon's husband sexually abuses with impunity. But Sarah's ability to tap into the "swerve" ethos safely insulates herself from the crippling psychological and sexual trauma which her mistress inflicts upon her.

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<sup>9</sup> *Paris is Burning*. Dir. Jennie Livingston. Perf. Andre Christian, Carmen and Brooke, David 'The Father' Xtravaganza, Dorian Corey and Paris Dupree. 1991. Film. For a closer look into New York's ball culture and the queer communities of color who shaped it, watch the documentary, *Paris is Burning*.

Considering Sarah's wielding of the "swerve ethos" as a tactic she enacts against Manon imbues Sarah with a range of depth largely denied her even in critical character analyses. In "Telling Forgotten Stories of Slavery in the Postmodern South," Susan Donaldson renders Sarah "a cipher, a successful rival for Manon's husband, and something very like a double, a mirror of Manon's own anger and victimization" (274). Amy K. King echoes this standpoint, conceptualizing Sarah as wholly inscrutable: "Because Manon vacillates between conflicting emotions regarding Sarah, the reader does not know how to interpret Sarah" (220). To be clear, both King's and Donaldson's critical assessment of Sarah is entirely logical. Because Martin does not devote a single chapter or brief section to Sarah in *Property* one yearns to hear her voice sans Manon's seemingly omniscient presence. It is in the everyday acts of communication between Manon and Sarah that readers encounter the shockingly cruel depths of power mistresses wielded over their slaves. As Toni Morrison writes in her ringing endorsement of the novel, *Property* offers both a "fresh" and "unsentimental look at what slaveowning does to (and for) one's interior life" (Morrison; *front cover*). Indeed, it is through Martin's unflinching gaze into the mind of a slave-owning white woman living in the antebellum South that we understand Foucault's articulation of power as the force which "reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives" (30). In Foucault's theoretical imaginings, power is quite literally everywhere—waiting to be seized. And yet, the transformative impact of power on Manon nearly overshadows substantive critical analyses of Sarah's relationship to the power Manon exerts over her. But to read

Sarah as Manon's "double" inevitably binds Sarah's humanity to Manon. That is, it tethers Sarah's existence to Manon's recognition of her in a problematic way.

Reading against this trend in the scholarship on *Property*, I posit that Sarah's deployment of the "swerve ethos" is the method by which she separates herself from Manon and fashions her own self-identity. Paradoxically, the wide-ranging depth of Sarah's humanity is on full display in what is perhaps the most sadistic scene in *Property*. As Sarah breastfeeds Nell, Manon glimpses a "drop of milk" clinging to Sarah's breasts. Without a moment's hesitation, Manon drops to her knees and forcefully guides Sarah's nipple into her mouth (Martin 76). The sexually charged language of this scene—Manon feels "a complementary tingling" in her breasts and she struggles not to "swoon"—exposes white women's perpetuation of a perverse sexual violence rooted in their barely concealed desire to sate both their unfulfilled maternal and sexual appetite. At play here, too, is Manon's desire to transform Sarah into the amorphous Mammy figure. Significantly, Manon abuses Sarah after witnessing her mother's horrific death from yellow fever. It is, however, not only the image of black fluid oozing from her mother's ears, nose, and mouth that instigates Manon's act of violence against Sarah. Rather, moments before Manon's mother dies, she issues Manon a stern rebuke: "You neglect your duties and so you have no control in your house" (Martin 69). With this brief but scathing remark, Manon's mother lays bare Manon's powerlessness within her own home. Even more, Manon's mother implicitly challenges Manon's superiority over Sarah, as the fact that her husband has chosen Sarah over Manon criticizes Manon's "failings as a wife" but also her shortcomings in the role of superior white woman. Reeling with rage, Manon quickly changes the subject to avoid the mortifying topic. Less

than a minute later, Manon witnesses the ghastly sight of her mother, thinking “I saw a sight so terrible it will haunt my dreams until I die” (69). The horrific chain of events preceding Manon’s sexual assault of Sarah confirms the origins of her actions as emanating first from her desire to banish both the ghastly image of her mother and the shocking rebuke her mother hurls at her to the furthest corner of her mind.

The circumstances surrounding Manon’s mother death restructures white women’s violence as a clearly calculated act motivated by Manon’s need to objectify Sarah to buoy her own shrinking self-confidence. As Sabine Broeck explains, this scene “seems to be an ingenious textual signification on the hundreds of scenes of black mammies feeding white babies in American cultural memory, nursing them into masterhood” (10). What Martin’s “textual signification” does differently, however, is more vividly display the black woman’s body as the site of perpetual struggle between white and black women. When Manon finally stops “greedily swallowing” Sarah’s milk, she opens her eyes to look at Sarah and observes that she “had lifted her chin as far away from me as she could, her mouth was set in a thin, hard line, and her eyes were focused intently on the arm of the settee” (Martin 76). The sharp, deliberate, and upward slant of Sarah’s chin away from Manon paired with her absolute refusal to look at Manon best embodies that particular air of disapproval and disgust lodged within the “side-eye.” Sarah’s “side-eye” forms the core of her nonverbal resistance to serving as source of enjoyment and comfort for Manon. With her mouth “set in a thin, hard line,” Sarah assumes a decidedly rigid posture that stands in stark opposition to the soft, pliable, and comforting mammy Manon desperately wants and needs Sarah to be. Sarah’s brazen display of defiance culminates in her refusal to cradle, or bring Manon’s head closer to

her breast. Unsurprisingly, Manon misreads Sarah's body language as an indicator of her fear, thinking that Sarah is "afraid to look at me" (Martin 76). While Sarah undoubtedly experienced a wide range of emotions here, which most likely include fear, it seems that Sarah use of the "side-eye" becomes the vehicle by which she rejects the exploitative script of Manon's imaginings.

Rooting Sarah's resistance in this "swerve ethos" challenges critics' romanticization of the relationship between Sarah and Manon as an erotic affair. In her review of *Property*, Joyce Carol Oates maintains that the "wordless scenes between mistress and servant, tenderly and sensuously described by Manon, are surrogates for romantic, erotic experiences" for both women (Oates 134). But reading the interactions between Sarah and Manon as erotic exchanges implicitly privileges Manon's perspective as the sole narrator of *Property*.<sup>10</sup> This particular point is essential because Manon's sexual exploitation and enjoyment of Sarah is made possible due to her refusal to acknowledge Sarah's pain. In Manon's estimation, Sarah is nothing more than a hypersexualized seductress responsible for her own pitiful fate. A brief summation of Sarah's plight more effectively showcases Manon's refusal to see the terms of Sarah's subjugation. After Gaudet purchases Sarah, he begins making inappropriate sexual advances towards her—a fact Manon is made aware of only after Sarah asks Manon to ask that Gaudet permit Sarah to marry an enslaved black man named Bam. When Manon interferes on Sarah's behalf, not only does Gaudet push Manon out of the room and slam the door in her face, but he also slaps and hits Sarah "until she was flat on the floor, begging him to stop" (Martin 23). Gaudet's reign of terror does not stop with Sarah: he

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immediately orders Bam to be whipped and sold. As soon as Sarah gives birth to Bam's child, Gaudet sends the boy to nurse at his brother's plantation with the understanding that the boy will be sold as soon as he was old enough to work. By the end of the year, Gaudet impregnates Sarah with her second child, Walter. In the aftermath of this overwhelming trauma, Sarah "wept, pleaded, then grew silent and secretive" (Martin 24).

The horrific events that Sarah endures are not enough to elicit Manon's sympathy, however. Reflecting on Sarah's plight, Manon thinks: "I sometimes think Sarah blames me for her fate, though I had nothing to do with it. She sealed it herself shortly after I arrived by getting pregnant" (Martin 23). At no point does Manon express this kind of harsh judgment for her husband. In fact, when Manon is confronted with her husband's illicit and adulterous sexual actions, she stubbornly refuses to see Sarah's victimization at the hands of Gaudet. Manon's refusal to consider Sarah's suffering best represents what literary critic Patricia Yaeger calls the "unthought known" or those experiences "lodged in the sensorium but not available to consciousness—hence known but unthought or unacknowledged" (111). For Manon, accepting that Sarah has been forced to sexually engage with her rapist and tormentor is a reality that she simply cannot acknowledge. Accepting this truth would disrupt Manon's ability to freely enjoy the rights and privileges bestowed upon her as a white slaveholding woman. As a Southern white woman living in the antebellum south, Manon's identity is indelibly linked to Sarah's subjugated status. Thus, Manon denies Sarah's pain because she does not want to upset the delicate balance between mistress and slave, white and black.

Nowhere is Manon's erasure of Sarah's pain and suffering more evident than when Manon witnesses Sarah exiting Gaudet's room in the middle of the night:

The image of Sarah as I had seen her leaving my husband's room filled my head, banishing these unendurable recollections. Her hair was all undone, her eyes bright, she was wearing a loose dressing gown I'd never seen before and a dark mantle pulled over it. I had only the quickest look at her in the lamplight, but I'd seen a great deal. (48).

The “unendurable recollections” Manon's cites here is her coming face-to-face with the fact that her husband is having sex with Sarah. As Yaeger argues in her study on southern women's writing in *Dirt and Desire*, “To “know the mind of the (white) South is to know what it refuses to think” (111). Manon's stubborn refusal to see Sarah's plight allows her to reconstruct Sarah as the chief agent in her own subjugation. Believing that the glimpse she sees of Sarah rushing from her husband's room reveals “a great deal,” Manon implicitly suggests that Sarah's wild hair, bright eyes, and loose gown are all visual signifiers of the mutual passion shared between Gaudet and Sarah. In *Scenes of Subjection*, Saidiya Hartman explains white women's frequent refusal to recognize enslaved black women's pain as the “discourse of seduction” which “[enables] those disgusted and enraged by the sexual arrangements of slavery, like Mary Bokykin Chestnut, to target slave women as the agents of their husband's downfall” (87). Like the Southern white female forebears before her, Manon cannot accept Sarah's tortured and circumscribed position. In fact, the mere thought of Gaudet having sex with Sarah initiates within Manon's a near psychological breakdown:

My head began to hammer. The room was so hot I was suffocating. I staggered to the dresser and poured out a glass of water, drank half of it, then poured the rest down the front of my shift. It was as if someone had

slapped me. In the distance I could hear shouting, the tolling of the bell. I gripped the table and hung my head forward, trembling from head to foot.

A feeling of dread crept over me as I realized that I was laughing. (48).

When faced the reality of Sarah's situation, Manon reacts as if she wants to physically expel this truth from her body by purifying her body with water and extracting the unbearable weight of this truth from within by erupting in shrill laughter. Thus, it is by reshaping Sarah into the role of seductress that Manon successfully restores her shattered equilibrium. Toni Morrison's notion of an "American Africanism" as the "reflexive" black persona whites utilized to ponder their own repressed desires and fears is quite literally at play here because Manon's misreading of Sarah as wanton seductress here tells us nothing about Sarah's subjectivity and everything about white female desire. Indeed, reducing Sarah to that of seductress frees Manon up to sexually and physically exploit Sarah for her own nefarious purposes. If there is any hint of the erotic between the two women it begins and ends with Manon's ability to erase Sarah's subjectivity to suit her. Further, if Manon's feelings for Sarah are predicated on erasing Sarah's suffering then Manon's desire for Sarah becomes more sinister and sadomasochistic in scope. In fact, Manon's refusal to see Sarah mirrors the parasitical relationship between Cynara and R. in Alice Randall's *The Wind Done Gone*. R.'s refusal to recognize Cynara's humanity beyond the sexual pleasure that her body provides him eventually causes Cynara to reject R.'s marriage proposal. When Cynara declines R.'s proposal, he is dumbfounded:

"I gave you my name," R. says.

"I never told you mine," I reply. (Randall 193)



R.'s disbelief is rooted in his understanding of his white male identity as source of privilege, security, and comfort. Surely, R. believes, the illegitimate and enslaved Cynara understands all that he brings to the proverbial table. Indeed, R. is not only proposing marriage, but also that Cynara live as a white woman with him in Europe. Therefore, Cynara's rejection is at once a renunciation of R.'s attempt to literally whitewash and erase her own African American heritage. Clapping back with "I never told you mine," Cynara refuses to become invisible by asserting the importance of her own unique cultural identity. In fact, this is an instance where the subaltern not only speaks, but also rejects the civilizing dominance of Western white empire.<sup>11</sup>

Although Sarah speaks little in *Property*, she nonetheless rejects Manon's and Gaudet's attempts to confine her to their traditional white supremacist script in much the same way Cynara does in *The Wind Done Gone*. In the especially chilling scene in which a band of fugitive slave rebels surround the plantation home, Sarah lays bare her absolute hatred for both Gaudet and Manon. With the rebels searching for the man of the household, Sarah momentarily pauses to point Gaudet out. In the midst of running frantically to secure her own freedom, Sarah nonetheless watches as the captain of the rebels swings a knife over his head before bringing it down over Gaudet's neck (114). The intensity with which Sarah watches her rapist's decapitation is at odds with the passionate expression Manon maps onto Sarah when she glimpses her coming from her husband's room. Even more significant, the violence that Sarah displays towards Manon in this same scene refutes critics' claims of a mutually shared eroticism between the two women. With Gaudet dead, Sarah does not assist or offer Manon any help. There has

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<sup>11</sup> I purposefully signify on Gayatri Spivak's well-known essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?"

been a tendency among scholars to imply that Gaudet's patriarchal male desire bars or interferes with Manon and Sarah's ability to forge a relationship.<sup>12</sup> Here, it seems Gaudet's death does nothing to dissuade Sarah from not only running right past Manon, but also violently attacking her with such force that it is difficult to infer that she shared any erotic or even sentimental feelings for Manon. Despite Manon's pleas for Sarah to stop and help her, Sarah turns on Manon "in a fury, tearing at my face with her free hand, her sharp nails digging into my already wounded cheek" (115). When Manon pleads with Sarah to let her get on the horse, Sarah kicks Manon and bites her hand before gathering the horse's reins and disappearing into the dark night. The two women do not, as some critics would like, ride off into the sunset together. Sarah essentially leaves Manon "for dead" as she flees toward freedom. In fact, it is perhaps not an exaggeration to suggest that if Sarah had more time she would have arranged for Manon's execution at the hands of the rebels next.

This is one of the most refreshing elements of *Property*: Martin's does not pacify readers with a more palatable version of white and black women's relationships. Although Martin's novel deliberately moves away from the image of the genteel Southern white mistress, a number of critics seem determined to reinforce this romanticized ideal. While Margaret Atwood does not go as far as Oates in her review of Martin's novel, she nonetheless conflates Manon's status as an embattled wife with Sarah's sufferings as a slave. Of Sarah and Manon, Atwood writes that they are both

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<sup>12</sup> King, Amy K. "Valerie Martin's *Property* and the Failure of the Lesbian Counterplot." *Mississippi Quarterly: The Journal of Southern Cultures* 63: 1/2 (Winter 2010): 211-231. Print.

While King acknowledges Manon's willful subjugation of Sarah, she also implies that the potential grounds for a harmonious union between the two women can occur in the absence of white men's dominating presence.

“brave and resourceful, and also long-suffering; they put up with a colossal amount of sadistic abuse and hypocrisy, not that they have a choice” (n.pag.). One wonders why and how Atwood confers bravery onto Manon when she so clearly embodies the archetypal slave mistress who, when given the chance, stakes her claim over Sarah’s body in an act rivaling that of her husband. As Ta-Nehisi Coates so eloquently explains, “in America, racism is a default setting. To do nothing, to go along with the market, to claim innocence or neutrality, is to inevitably be a cog in the machine of racist hierarchy” (“Nina Simone’s Face”). In *Property*, Manon is the “cog” lodged in the racist machine: she does not go out of her way to make Sarah’s life any better, and when Manon does interact with Sarah it is largely done out of a desire to explore her own inner desires and failings. In fact, Manon is most resourceful when marshalling her forces against Sarah’s failed runaway attempt. Perhaps most problematic, Atwood erects an illogical parallel between slave and slave mistress by perpetuating the notion that both Manon and Sarah occupy the same servile position and therefore neither one has any choice or options in the matter. The fact that Manon, despite her realization that her husband is a simple-minded barbarian, freely chose to marry her husband speaks to her privileged and distinct status in relation to Sarah’s status as chattel property. As Christina Sharpe asserts in her excellent article “The Lie at the Center of Everything,” Atwood’s reading of Manon “erases relations of power and property by collapsing Sarah’s suffering and Manon’s by refusing to account for Manon’s ownership of Sarah and that much of the quotidian violence in words and deeds detailed in the novel is unleashed by Manon on Sarah” (196-7). Drawing out Manon’s deployment of “quotidian violence” is fundamental to elucidating Manon’s dominance and Sarah’s creative reactions to it.

Sarah's challenging of Manon's dominance surfaces in what appears, at least on the surface, to be a perfectly mundane interaction between mistress and slave. As Manon ponders the rising number of runaway slaves springing up, the sound of Sarah ripping an old gown for quilting interrupts her thoughts and she is suddenly possessed by "a desire to hear [Sarah] speak" (Martin 54). Manon tosses out what seems like an insignificant question about the hearing ability of Sarah's daughter, Nell: "Does that one hear?" This seemingly innocent question belies the muted racial undertones of Manon's inquiry, however. For Manon's question—"Does that one hear?"—pivots on the inherent perversity of blackness. Walter, "the violently conceived, incorrigible, deaf, and mute son" of Sarah and Mr. Gaudet, becomes the literal embodiment of a perverse and inferior blackness (Sharpe 198). Walter's inferiority lies in what his mixed-raced body represents: illicit sex between white men and black women. More specifically, Manon's "Does that one hear?" exposes her belief in the mulatto myth in which the mingling of white and black blood violates social norms. For Manon, Sarah's (not Gaudet's) clear breach of the social code thereby substantiates Walter's *and* Nell's abnormality. That is, Manon makes no distinction between Walter and Nell because their mixed raced bodies collapse racial boundaries. This crossing of racial boundaries necessitates both Walter's and Nell's deformity. Thus, in asking "Does that one hear" Manon is implicitly suggesting that the source of Walter's abnormality is lodged within Sarah's black body; therefore, Nell too must exhibit a similar kind of aberrance.

What is most striking here is that Sarah purposefully chooses not to verbally respond to Manon's inquiry:

For answer, Sarah laid the cloth in her lap, turned toward the creature and clapped her palms together, making a sharp crack, like a shot. The baby's hands flew up above the top of the box and it let out a soft cry of surprise. Sarah turned back to her work, her mouth set in an annoying smirk.

"Why not just answer me?" I protested.

She had come to the hem of the gown, which she pulled free of the skirt in one long shriek. (Martin 55)

More specifically, Sarah's nonverbal response essentially dismisses Manon's offensive question with such poise that Manon is rendered insignificant and foolish. By not "speaking," Sarah leverages her power *not* to accommodate Manon's racial expectations. Most crucially, Sarah does not even dignify the insult with a direct response, forcing Manon to reckon with the consequences of how she addresses Sarah. Sarah "swerves" on Manon with such calculated precision that Manon does not fully comprehend or register the source of the insult: "Why not just answer me?" Without even saying a word, Sarah reasserts her humanity by dividing herself from Manon just as she splits the hem of the gown from the skirt. Further, Sarah's "checking" of Manon buoys her up with a sense of righteous dignity and refutes any claims of Sarah as Manon's mere double.

When Sarah's actions are viewed through the "swerve ethos" it becomes evident that Sarah takes particular delight in rendering Manon a fool. Sarah's penchant for flustering Manon is illustrated in the pivotal speech that she delivers in the final scene of *Property*:

“When you gets to the North,” she said, “they invites you to the dining room, and they asks you to sit at the table. They offers you a cup of tea, and they asks, ‘Does you want cream and sugar?’”

I was dumbfounded. It was more than I had ever heard her say. My uncle was right, I thought. She had changed; she’d gone mad. I took a swallow of my coffee. “And this appealed to you?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said, raising her eyes very coolly to mine. “It appeal to me.”

(192)

On one level, Sarah is unmistakably defiant here when she looks Manon right in the eye, thereby effectively destabilizes the strict social boundaries between mistress and slave. There is, however, another stealthier, less recognizable form of resistance operating just beneath the surface and embedded into Sarah’s declaration, “It appeal to me.” In black cultural parlance, Sarah is “reading” Manon. Drag queen and actor RuPaul explains the defining element of the “read” as a verbal rejoinder that “wittingly and incisively expose a person’s flaws” with such efficiency that the person’s vulnerabilities are laid open like the pages of a book (“RuPaul’s Drag Race Dictionary”). For this reason, anyone can go on an angry tirade, but not everyone can “read.”

When Sarah coolly raises her eyes to Manon’s and delivers her brief declaration she is exposing Manon as a barbarian whose failure to comprehend why a black woman desires to be treated like any other human being forms the bedrock of white people’s pathological mindset. Sarah’s incrimination of Manon closely parallels Toni Morrison’s “read” of whiteness as a pervasive illness sickening all white people who subscribe and

benefit from white supremacy. During an interview with the acclaimed author, Charlie Rose asked Morrison how she felt about racism, Morrison coolly redirected the question back to him, asserting that “white people have a very serious problem and ‘they’ should start thinking about what ‘they’ can do about it. Take me out if it” (“Interview with Charlie Rose”). For Morrison, the price of the white ticket, so to speak, leaves white people emotionally “bereft” by distorting their psyche. Miraculously, whites assume that it is blacks’ responsibility to solve the problem of racism that they themselves perpetuate and benefit from. This line of thinking fails to acknowledge that racism is black people’s burden only because whites have the power to abdicate and displace their culpability. Instead of explaining how politically loaded, insulting, and hypocritical his question was, Morrison conveyed her disdain both in refusing to dignify Rose with an answer and redirecting the question to Rose and white people in general. This is precisely the point Sarah seems to make when she defiantly asserts her right to be treated like a human being. If you cannot understand why I prefer to be treated with respect, Sarah seems to say, then the problem is with you, not me. For both Morrison and Sarah, “reading” whiteness for “filth” serves as a necessary buffer between toxic whiteness and sustaining their own black identities.<sup>13</sup> It is little wonder that Sarah’s very dignified read of Manon leaves her stupefied: “What on earth did they think were doing?” Sarah shuts Manon down with such efficiency that, in the words of RuPaul, “the library is closed.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> “Reading” someone for “filth” is to criticize the person to the fullest extent.

<sup>14</sup> This is a popular phrase that RuPaul repeats during a segment of his televised show “RuPaul’s Drag Race.” During this “library” session, contestants “read” their opponents by verbally and wittingly disparaging them. When a contestant delivers an especially scathing “read,” RuPaul triumphantly declares: “The library is closed!”

That *Property* ends with this image of a deeply puzzled Manon wholly incapable of understanding Sarah implies that while Manon will most likely continue abusing Sarah and other enslaved black people around her, Sarah, too, will not stop challenging Manon by serving up a steady dose of “side-eyes” and “reads” that only confuse Manon. In fact, Sarah’s speech at the close of the novel is simply the link in a chain of resistance which forms the core of the contentious relationship between the two women. And here again, I want to complicate the conventional scholarly contention that the speech Sarah delivers at the close of the novel represents Sarah’s burgeoning awareness of herself as social subject entitled to being treated like a human being.<sup>15</sup> Although the speech is certainly an assertion of Sarah’s unique and complex individuality, assessing Sarah’s speech as a sudden revelation spurred by her recent escape north tacitly suggests that Sarah has, up until now, been veiling her emotions under a carefully concealed mask of stupidity. Donning the mask of stupidity was undoubtedly a method of covert resistance which both enslaved black men and women utilized to deceive their oppressors. However, filtering Sarah’s actions through the lens of the “swerve ethos” provides an alternative narrative of resistance grounded in unmistakable displays of black quintessence.

Nowhere is Sarah’s utilization of the “swerve ethos” more prominently displayed than when Manon steps outside for a breath of fresh air only to feel Sarah’s gaze upon her. As Manon stands in the yard, she realizes that a runaway slave who meant harm could easily observe the entire layout of the house from her position, which is “quite an

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<sup>15</sup> Donaldson, Susan. “Telling Forgotten Stories of Slavery in the Postmodern South.” *Southern Literary Journal* 40.2 (2008): 267-83. Print.

Donaldson writes that Sarah’s speech “underscores Sarah’s new openly voiced expectations to be treated not as a subordinate but as a subject in her own right, one who is acknowledged and whose sense of self is recognized and confirmed by those around her” (280).



excellent command post.” At the very moment that Manon realizes how vulnerable her home is to an impending slave insurrection, Sarah appears in Manon’s bedroom:

I looked back at my own window. The curtains seemed to be moving against something heavy, then they parted and Sarah appeared, holding her baby. She saw me at once, but she didn’t start or turn away. She just stood there, her dress half-opened, looking down at me coolly. She’s a nerveless creature, I thought. There really is something inhuman about her. After a few moments I grew weary of looking at her and went back into the house.  
(Martin 42)

In this scene, the simple act of refusing to look away becomes an open act of sedition. In fact, Sarah’s refusal to move merely because Manon wants her to do so situates her open and frank display of resistance. The sense of poise that Sarah assumes here is manifested via her refusal to “start or turn away” from Manon. Sarah’s unabashed display of defiance is borne from her self-actualized status. Coolly looking down at Manon, Sarah tacitly refuses to acknowledge Manon’s supposedly superior presence.

It is clear from Manon’s description of Sarah as a “nerveless creature” that it is Sarah’s unceasing ability to reveal the limitations of Manon’s authority that truly unsettles her. Most significant here is Manon’s conscious decision *not* to understand Sarah’s defiance. Rather than deal with the implications of Sarah’s clear challenge to Manon’s white supremacist power, Manon simply settles on the idea that Sarah is a “nerveless creature.” As I have been arguing throughout this chapter, it is not simply that Sarah challenges Manon, but that she reduces Manon

to a fool by deploying a series of looks and phrases from a decidedly Black repertoire. Essentially, Sarah's unapologetically black body unnerves Manon. Thus, Sarah although she remains bound to Manon in form, she retains the ability to carve out a space of creative self-expression that Manon cannot possess. This is no small thing, as Manon's violence against Sarah will most likely intensify now that Manon is entirely free from her husband. It is nightmare that, for Sarah, "never ends."<sup>16</sup> The sliver of hope for Sarah is her careful surveillance of Manon and her and open "checks" to Manon's authority. When Manon awakens from a nightmare only to find her slave Sarah intently watching her, she realizes that Sarah has been staring at her as she sleeps: "When I turned on my side, I looked down to where Sarah lay, the child curled up at her side, her wide eyes watching me, and I thought, She has been watching me like that this entire night" (Martin 13). Sarah's haunting presence confirms her awareness of Manon's predatory behavior. Within the Black vernacular, the phrase "seent" connotes the wariness with which one regards someone who cannot be fully trusted. Needless to say, the full extent of Manon's exploitative behavior has been "seent" by Sarah. If Sarah is to survive Manon's cruel dominance, she must "stay woke" and remain conscious of Manon's scheming so that she can devise creative psychological defenses to neutralize the impact of Manon's abuse.

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<sup>16</sup> *Property* begins with this opening line: "It never ends." Manon thinks this as she watches the cruel sexually violent game her husband plays with young black boys. It seems, however, that Manon is thinking of her insufferable marriage with Gaudet, and not the boys' plight.

## Chapter Four:

### “Spoilt like a Rotten Oyster”: Fictive Sterilization in Kathryn Stockett’s *The Help*



Figure 3: Several ads like these were unveiled during Black History Month. (Photo courtesy of That's Abortion.com)

On October 15, 2010, Heroic Media, a faith based non-profit group, unveiled a billboard displaying a photograph of Anissa Fraser, a 4-year-old African American girl (“Mother Sues Anti-Choice Groups Behind Billboards”). Above Anissa’s head read the caption: “The most dangerous place for an African American is the womb.” Initially debuting in Texas, the controversial billboard resurfaced approximately four months later in New York and Florida. When Anissa’s mother, Tricia Fraser, sued the anti-choice group for using her daughter’s image without permission, Fraser’s lawyer condemned the sign’s depiction of “African American women [as] dangerous to their children” (“Mother Sues Anti-Choice Groups Behind Billboards”). Most remarkably, the billboard embeds several racist stereotypes within a single sentence by conceptualizing African American children as an endangered species; African American neighborhoods as inherently more

violent than Caucasian neighborhoods; African American women's bodies as perpetually hazardous spaces.

In one fell swoop, then, the ad depicts black women as locus of the black community's ills while touting its legitimate concern about black children. The billboard's traversal through competing and intersecting images of pathological blackness visually reproduces Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality. Articulating the distinctive pressures that black women experience, Crenshaw explains that the "intersection of racism and sexism factors into Black women's lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately" (1244). Triply oppressed by their race, gender, and subjugated status, black women experience a unique form of oppression which positions them as "de mules uh de world."<sup>17</sup> Quite impressively, Kathryn Stockett's *The Help* etches a tripartite of pernicious stereotypes onto black women's bodies in much the same way that the billboard rolls out competing and interlocking systems of oppression specifically targeting black women's reproductive health. Stockett's crafty melding of the Matriarch/Breeder Woman, Mammy, and Black Lady archetype construct black motherhood as the perpetual cradle of contamination.

Widely panned by critics as an updated version of the Mammy mythology so readily apparent in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Gone with the Wind*, *The Help*'s portrayal of Aibileen's steadfast devotion to Mae Mobley most certainly dredges up nostalgic yearnings for a return to the days when enslaved black women first toiled on the

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<sup>17</sup> Here, I refer to the advice that Nanny gives Janie about black women's oppression in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

plantation and later in white women's homes as domestic maids. As historian Micki McElya posits, both the film and book "present us with a Mammy narrative for the 21<sup>st</sup> century" ("*The Help Doesn't Help Domestic Workers*"). Stockett herself confessed her primary motivation for penning her 2009 novel as the somewhat desperate attempt to reconnect with her maid, Demetrie, so that she could "hear Demetrie's voice again" (*The Help*; Postscript) Yet the pathological tropes of black womanhood in *The Help* complicate this general consensus of the text as little more than trite regurgitation of the Mammy mythology.

The Mammy narrative is but one myth Stockett launches at black women. The slew of pernicious stereotypes aimed at black women in *The Help* emphasizes its traipsing through a panoply of negative images. With its consistent portrayal of black people as an uncontrollable horde of black bodies, *The Help* is a text thoroughly concerned with black women's fertility as their abnormally fecund yet diseased bodies prove responsible for reproducing scores of ill-behaved children. From its opening pages, *The Help* paints a disturbing portrait of blackness with Aibileen as the chief illustrator:

Down the road from Belhaven is white Woodland Hills, then Sherwood Forest, which is miles a big live oaks with the moss hanging down. Nobody living in it yet, but it's there for when white folks is ready to move somewhere else new...So Jackson's just one white neighborhood after the next and more springing up down the road. But the colored part a town, we one big anthill, surrounded by state land that ain't for sale. As our numbers get bigger, we can't spread out. Our part a town just gets thicker. (Stockett 15)

Conceptualizing “the colored part a town” as a swarming throng of insects, Aibileen suggests that the swelling number of blacks in Jackson will eventually overpower the smaller white population. Even more troubling, Aibileen’s views directly parallel Mrs. Phelan’s comments about black women’s reckless sexuality. When Skeeter finally learns that her own mother prompted Constantine’s move to Illinois after telling Constantine’s daughter that neither one of her parents wanted her, Mrs. Phelan refuses to admit any wrongdoing. Instead Mrs. Phelan scorns the entire affair as “nothing more than a colored thing” (Stockett 95). This casual dismissal of Constantine’s domestic affairs as mere “colored thing” severs Constantine’s claim to motherhood by trivializing the relationship between a black mother and her daughter. Worse, by denigrating Constantine’s private domestic affair as nothing more than a “colored thing” Mrs. Phelan castigates black women for daring to resist their white employers’ exploitative grips. Mrs. Phelan’s espousal of this racist reasoning hearkens back to plantation myths reducing black women to hypersexual breeders capable of producing offspring at dangerously high rates. And, just as paternalistic slave masters sought to maintain control over enslaved black women’s bodies, Mrs. Phelan’s displeasure largely stems from her inability to police Constantine’s black female body: “I looked at Constantine and I felt so much shame for her. To get pregnant in the first place and then to lie...” (Stockett 428). Mapping shame onto Constantine’s black body allows Mrs. Phelan to regain a sense of control over her former employee while fortifying strict boundaries between black and white women.

Going even further, Mrs. Phelan carves pathology onto the entire black community after confessing to a shocked Skeeter that “they are not like regular *people*” (Stockett 429). In Mrs. Phelan’s estimation, white people set the standard for normalcy as

they are “regular people” with typical procreation rates. Predictably, the source of black people’s abnormality, according to Mrs. Phelan, is black women’s unnatural desire for procreation: “They’re different that way, you know. Those people have children and don’t think about the consequences until it’s too late” (Stockett 426). Linking Mrs. Phelan’s views to Aibileen’s private musings about the “colored part a town” highlights one of the most unsettling elements of *The Help*: black women frequently disparage black people in the absence of a pernicious white gaze. Perhaps Mrs. Phelan’s obviously racist views are not surprising as she is a middle-aged white woman living in Jackson, Mississippi in the 1960s. But how to explain away Aibileen’s eerily similar views? Skeeter’s obvious repulsion for her mother’s comments offer the mitigating voice necessary to steer readers away from sympathizing with Mrs. Phelan. But when black characters express similar sentiments there is neither an interruption nor a qualifier. Thus, Stockett’s authorial decision not to interrupt Aibileen’s ponderings appears intentional and insidious. Simply put, Aibileen’s ponderings expose Stockett’s own anxieties regarding black women’s sexuality and fertility because the black bodies of Aibileen and Minny function as the vehicles by which Stockett conveniently regulates and assails black female sexuality. Aibileen’s thoughts, emerging from a black woman’s private musings, produce the illusion of reality as her troubling perspective goes wholly unchecked. As a result, Aibileen becomes culpable in her own erasure as a mother.

Private moments such as these set the stage for a recurring pattern in *The Help*. As Minny and Aibileen walk home from their evening church service, the two women chat about Clyde deserting Aibileen to be with another woman named Cocoa: “Week after Clyde left you, I heard that Cocoa wake up to her cootchie spoilt like a rotten oyster.

Didn't get better for three months" (Stockett 28). The comparison between Cocoa's vagina and the foul stinking oyster pinpoints disease within a black woman's chief reproductive organ. And, as Cocoa's name implies, this branding subtly imagines *all* (cocoa) brown-skinned women's vaginas as infectious sources of malady. Framed as an intimate conversation between two best friends, Minny's casual divulgence of Cocoa's spoilt "cootchie" is spoken far beyond the reaches of the white gaze. That Minny vocalizes disgust about another black woman's vagina in a black space tinges her comment with frightening authenticity. Minny's comments are particularly vexing as *The Help* hints that it is Minny who inadvertently infects Hilly with her diseased body. Or, in other words, Minny's "cootchie" is most likely "spoilt like a rotten oyster" as well. Minny's sustained degradation plays out in the representation of her body, specifically her vagina, as the source of disease. By the novel's end, the cold sore dotting Hilly's lip suggests that eating Minny's "shit-pie" causes Hilly to contract a venereal disease from Minny. As Foster-Singletary writes in "Dirty South: The Help and the Problem of Black Bodies," "Minny's large, often pregnant body represents the hypersexuality that black female bodies have absorbed" (102). For her hypersexual behavior, Minny gets punished and shamed as diseased. When Hilly marches up to Skeeter's door to confront her, Skeeter immediately takes in her wild appearance and the cold sore: "Half her blouse is untucked, her fat stretching the buttons, and I can see she's gained more weight. And there's a...sore. It's in the corner of her mouth, scabby and hot red. I haven't seen Hilly with one of those since Johnny broke up with her in college" (Stockett 494). Skeeter's description of Hilly exposes her as literal "shit-eater," but it also emphasizes Minny's primary role in this reprehensible act and "outs" her as the source of the venereal



disease.<sup>18</sup> Minny's casual dismissal of Cocoa is even more disturbing because of her own health issues but here is Minny appearing as a black woman simply 'telling it like it is.'

This is the strangely seductive feature of Stockett's novel: black women imbue *The Help* with sizzling authenticity. In spite of its troubling depictions of black women, *The Help* spent more than 100 weeks on *The New York Times* Bestseller list. *USA Today* hailed the novel as "one of the best debut novels of the year" (Memmot, "Good 'Help Isn't Hard to Find, Thanks to Kathryn Stockett"). Critics cited Stockett's seemingly expert ability to "personalize the broader issue of civil rights by focusing on one slice of the black experience" as the hallmark of the novel's success (Puig, "'The Help': It's Fine Work All Around"). However, for all its multiple allusions to civil rights leaders and the civil rights movement itself, *The Help* makes no mention of the state sanctioned sterilizations directly affecting black women in the south. This seeming lacuna is even more disturbing since involuntary sterilizations of black women in Mississippi were so widespread during the sixties that the procedure was commonly referred to as a "Mississippi appendectomy" (Roberts 90). In 1963, the same year Skeeter notes that "they've invented a pill so married women don't have to get pregnant," Fannie Lou Hamer gave a speech at the Washington Capitol and informed the crowd there that "six out of ten black women who walked into Sunflower County Hospital in Mississippi were sterilized" (Roberts 90). Hamer herself had been forcibly sterilized in 1961. Despite its Jackson, Mississippi setting, *The Help* is virtually silent about one of the most pressing civil rights issues directly impacting black women in the south.

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<sup>18</sup> While Stockett does not make the status of Minny's health explicit, the cold sore on Hilly's lip implies that Minny does indeed have a sexually transmitted illness. Tikenya Foster-Singletary also considers that this is Stockett's implicit suggestion in "Dirty South: *The Help* and the Problem of Black Bodies."

This is not to suggest that Stockett should have included anecdotal information about black women's involuntary sterilizations. Nor am I arguing that *The Help* omits this issue entirely. Black women's reproductive health is never fully written out of the novel; it bleeds through the pages of *The Help* as the diseased yet peculiarly fecund black female body stands on display. The phenomenon by which black women in *The Help* surface as asexual spinsters or overwhelmingly fertile breeders fictively sterilizes them. I use the term fictive sterilization to define the punishment readers are encouraged to heap on black mothers for their corporeal embodiment of deviance. Although none of the black women in *The Help* are literally sterilized, the juxtaposing of Minny's aberrantly fecund body against Miss Celia's barren white one reinforces notions of black women as dirty, diseased, and inept mothers who *should* refrain from having children.

An amalgam of the breeder woman, matriarch, and mammy, Minny is first assailed as an inherently bad black mother as her brood of feisty, ill-mannered children hint at her objectionable parenting skills. Minny's five year old daughter, Kindra, illustrates this point. Consistently characterized as rolling her eyes and standing with her hands on her hips, Kindra appears a mini-version of her sassy, loud-mouthed mother. Kindra's outspokenness and perceived womanish ways deny her the right to be loved and adored. In "Black Girlhood and *The Help*," Julia S. Jordan-Zachery asserts that "Kindra cannot be perceived as innocent because she defies her "place" in white society" (89). Despite Minny's abusive home environment, Aibileen never worries about Kindra—or any of Minny's children for that matter. In fact, Kindra will most likely endure punishment for her bad attitude just as her mother suffers at the hands of her husband.

The fictive sterilization of Minny plays out in Stockett's depiction of her as a bad mother wholly deserving of the abuse she suffers at the hands of her husband, Leroy. Minny's steadfast refusal to embody the Mammy archetype—"If I'd played Mammy, I'd of told Scarlett to stick those green draperies up her white little pooper. Make her own damn man-catching dress"—necessitates her marginalization as a mother (Stockett 59). As Patricia Hill-Collins contends, denigrating black women as "bad mothers" penalizes black women for failing to properly serve whites in the required subservient manner (79). While Stockett instills a feisty rebelliousness in Minny, she nonetheless constructs Minny as a "bad mother" and it is her status as a "bad mother" that constitutes Minny's deviance. While visiting Minny, Aibileen compares Minny's house to "a chicken coop on fire" (Stockett 396). However, Aibileen does not think that there is anything particularly surprising about the chaos surrounding her because "as usual, Minny's house be like a chicken coop on fire. Minny be hollering, things be flinging around, all the kids squawking" (Stockett 465). But Aibileen's description dehumanizes Minny and her children by likening Minny to a mother hen whose home is filled with a flock of boisterous chickens squawking for her attention. It is not only that Stockett delegitimizes Minny as a "bad mother" here but that this scene draws on the historical legacies of chattel slavery in which slave masters denied black women's right to motherhood by diminishing the maternal connection between enslaved black women and their children. In the eyes of slaveholders, black women were merely breeders, not mothers. In *The Help*, parallels to this breeder woman image surface when, Minny, mother of six "squawking" kids, is suddenly pregnant at the close of the novel. Although Minny's fertility is never explicitly discussed, Minny's growing belly alludes to the fact that that

there will definitely be more children in her future. Yet her chaotic and abusive home life implicitly suggest that Minny's aberrantly fecund body is in desperate need of sterilization.

In fact, relief washes over Aibileen after glimpsing Minny's growing belly since "Leroy, he don't hit Minny when she pregnant. And Minny know this so I spec they's gone be a lot more babies after this one" (Stockett 465). This is the price Minny pays for refusing to embody the docile and asexual mammy figure. However, Minny's abuse is most troubling specifically because she is repeatedly portrayed as deserving of the abuse she suffers. In effect, Minny becomes the instrument of her own oppression. Recalling her violent encounter with Leroy, Minny struggles to come to terms with her husband beating her not because he is drunk, but "for the pure pleasure of it" (Stockett 359). Remembering this moment brings on a shame "so heavy" Minny feels as though it might pull her to the floor (Stockett 359). That Minny has done nothing to deserve this abuse is not enough to engender readers' sympathy. Although Miss Celia offers Minny comfort, the naked white man fondling himself outside Miss Celia's window quickly diverts attention away from Minny's situation thereby undercutting the opportunity for readers to empathize with her. The naked white man's sudden appearance removes Minny's plight from view just as we are encouraged to feel sympathy for her.

But it is what Minny does next that is truly inexplicable. Minny, despite her bruised forehead, reacts swiftly to defend Miss Celia's honor by rushing outside before warning Miss Celia to stay in the kitchen. The naked white man, holding and pointing his "gigantic flopping po' boy" at Minny, confirms Minny's *blackness and femaleness* as worthy of abuse:

His eyes search the window. They land right on mine, staring a dark line across the lawn. I shiver. It's like he knows me, Minny Jackson. He's staring with his lip curled like I deserved every bad day I've ever lived, every night I haven't slept, every blow Leroy's ever given. Deserved it and more. (Stockett 360)

Had Minny banished the white man from the house (and her thoughts) this could have been a triumphant moment. Instead, the chance for redemption fades as the scene becomes darkly comical with the obese Minny trotting after the white man offering her his “pecker pie” (Stockett 362). This droll moment effectively writes out any potential sexual abuse by deliberately veiling Minny's potential sexual abuse with comedy. The recent publication of a letter written by Rosa Parks detailing a white man's attempt to sexually assault her during her time as a domestic worker illuminates the precarious position black women faced when entering these hostile white spaces. In a six-page essay, Parks writes that she “was ready to die” before allowing her white assailant to rape her, writing the words “Never, never” in bold caps (Illytzky, “Rosa Parks Essay Reveals Rape Attempt”). For Parks and many other domestic workers like her, the danger of sexual abuse within white women's houses was a threat they could not afford to take lightly. But *The Help* conspicuously dodges the sexual violence black women domestics endured at the hands of white men through its debasement of Minny's black body. Even worse, Stockett writes out black women's history of resistance to white men, as Miss Celia emerges as Minny's great white savior.

After the white man punches Minny on the same side of the face that Leroy hits her, Miss Celia saves Minny by cracking the fire poker down on the man's back.

Ostensibly, Miss Celia's white body is venerated against Minny's black one. Miss Celia's actions bolster up whiteness as heroic while simultaneously confirming her body as healthy despite her inability to produce children. Indeed the moment serves as a transformative one for Miss Celia. In spite of sustaining the blow from the white man's drunken rage, Minny has time to observe Miss Celia with quiet admiration:

She's got no goo on her face, her hair's not sprayed, her nightgown's like an old prairie dress. She takes a deep breath through her nose and I see the white trash girl she was ten years ago. She was strong. She didn't take no shit from nobody. (Stockett 365)

Here is the *real* Miss Celia. And, in this instance, Stockett inscribes upon the innocent yet resilient Miss Celia a tacit analysis of Southern bourgeoisie white womanhood and its indelible link to marriage, motherhood, and vulnerability. The metaphorical "fish out of water," Miss Celia's entrée into Southern bourgeoisie society is barred by her white trash upbringing and Hilly's unyielding hatred for her. Try as she might, Miss Celia will never have access to Hilly's world. However, it is through Minny's offensive black body that Miss Celia's strivings are brought to the fore. Despite Minny providing the necessary foil to Aibileen's deferential mammyish manner, her unwavering protection of Miss Celia proves that she too stands poised to staunchly defend white women's honor even at the cost of her own safety.

Thus, Minny's fierce protection of Miss Celia serves as a direct parallel to Aibileen's incessant cooing over Mae Mobley. Although she erects a clear boundary between her and the traditionally subservient Mammy ("If I'd played Mammy, I'd of told Scarlett to stick those green draperies up her white little pooper"), Minny treats Miss

Celia in an obsequious manner rivaling that of Mammy in *Gone with the Wind*. When Sugar snickers at Miss Celia for getting drunk at the Benefit party, Minny slaps her with such force that “soapsuds [fly] through the air” (Stockett 393). Minny then yanks Sugar up and gives her a warning laced with the threat of more violence: “You shut your mouth, Sugar. Don’t you never let me hear you talking bad about the lady who put food in your mouth, clothes on your back! You hear me?” (Stockett 393). Interestingly enough, Leroy’s abusive tendencies do not stop Minny from striking her own children. While Minny’s attack of Sugar resembles the verbal and physical abuse Aunt Chloe heaps on her own children in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, what renders Minny’s violence even more insidious is that she slaps Sugar in the absence of a dominant white presence. This violent act, occurring within the confines of Minny’s home, implies that this is indeed the way black people behave even when they are safely tucked away from the white gaze. Minny’s violence operates as normal, if not, natural in this scene. And, once again, whiteness appears impregnable as it is never to be mocked or denigrated.

*The Help’s* treatment of Miss Celia’s miscarriage further highlights this sycophantic relationship between Miss Celia and Minny as her black body exists only to make Miss Celia’s suffering visible to readers. Propping Minny’s body up against Miss Celia’s forms the necessary conduit by which Miss Celia’s plight becomes all the more heart-wrenching. As a woman who seems to have it all, Miss Celia’s spacious house, loving husband, and Marilyn Monroe features encourage readers to see her as a woman worthy of love and respect. Minny’s excessively fecund body and disorderly domestic life stands out in stark contrast. It seems a cruel twist of fate, then, that Miss Celia cannot

have children while the morbidly obese and chronically unemployed Minny will be pregnant with her sixth child by the novel's end.

Fearing something has gone wrong when Miss Celia spends all day in the bathroom, Minny rushes in to find Miss Celia slumped down on the floor with blood dotting her nightgown. Unfortunately, Minny's role here is purely reflexive since her presence only engenders an examination of Miss Celia's private fears. Minny initially believes Miss Celia's alcoholic habits have finally caught up with her, but Miss Celia quickly dispels this notion by informing Minny that the whiskey bottles are simply "catch tonic" to assist her body with carrying a child (Stockett 275). Miss Celia's clarification forces readers to cope with the fact that the true source of disease is inconceivably lodged within Miss Celia's healthy white body: "I was taking a shower and I felt it pulling down, hurting. So I set on the toilet and it slipped out. Like it wanted *out of me*" (Stockett 275). The tone of incredulity embedded into the phrase, "*out of me*" accentuates Miss Celia as a benevolent person entirely undeserving of this misfortune by virtue of her whiteness.

In the ensuing silence settling between the two women, Minny realizes that "for a minute, we're just two people wondering why things are the way they are" (Stockett 276). Here, Minny's seemingly innocuous musings only highlight Miss Celia's sufferings. It is as if Minny is asking why this young, fit, white woman with a loving husband and a beautiful house cannot have children. *How could this happen to Miss Celia, paragon of virtue?* Minny's musings also produce the inverse: *Why is Minny, an obese black woman, capable of producing so many children?* This lopsided pairing of Miss Celia and Minny exposes "the parasitical nature of white freedom," as this scene fictively sterilizes Minny as a woman who should stop or be stopped from having



children because if there is anyone who needs to stop having children it is Minny (Morrison 57).

Heightening the contrast between the two women is Stockett's repeated use of whiteness as a means of fortifying Miss Celia with an angelic purity. Minny observes that Miss Celia's "complexion is the color of fabric softener, a flat milky-blue" (Stockett 271). Even Miss Celia's pain is color-coded white as the "milky-blue" tint of Miss Celia's skin slowly gives way to a whiteness so blinding that Minny watches as "the harder she cries, the whiter she turns" (Stockett 277). When Miss Celia loses consciousness, Minny screams and tries to wake her, but Miss Celia's "a soft white lump" next to her (Stockett 277). In her perceptive "Dirty South: *The Help* and the Problem of Black Bodies," Tikenya Foster-Singletary argues that despite her whiteness Miss Celia retains an outsider status since she hails from a white trash area known simply as Sugar Ditch. However, Miss Celia's underprivileged background never fully nullifies her cultural investment in whiteness. In fact, Marilyn Monroe's early life closely parallels Miss Celia's underprivileged upbringing. And, as the name Sugar Ditch suggests, Miss Celia may have grown up surrounded by black folk and ditches, but she is as white as sliced sugar cane.<sup>19</sup> While Miss Celia is "blackened" by her non-standard dialect and impoverished past, Stockett insulates Miss Celia from blackness by perpetually shrouding her in whiteness (Foster-Singletary 103). Miss Celia is quite literally cloaked "in a cloud of dust[y]" flour when she first meets Minny:

The white lady sticks her hand out to me and I study her. She might be built like Marilyn [Monroe], but she ain't ready for no screen test. She's

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<sup>19</sup> Sliced sugar cane is not always dazzling white in color, but off-white in appearance.

got flour in her yellow hairdo. Flour in her glue-on eyelashes. And flour all over that tacky pink pantsuit. (Stockett 36-7)

It matters little that Miss Celia drops her *g*'s and peppers her speech with *ain'ts* because her alignment with a legendary figure of whiteness (and white male desire) forecloses the possibility of Miss Celia's body being metaphorically "blackened." In fact, the flour blanketing Miss Celia's body conjures up the iconic photograph of Monroe kneeling seductively in a flowing white dress. That is, Miss Celia's powdery white appearance reifies notions of white women as inheritors of an innocent and delicate sexuality. The nexus between Miss Celia's benevolence and her whiteness only magnifies her status as a white woman worthy of concern. Of course, Minny's assertion that Miss Celia "ain't ready for no screen test" reduces Miss Celia to a white trash version of Marilyn Monroe. Still, that Miss Celia embodies an ersatz Monroe recalls Monroe's humble beginnings as a child in foster homes when she was known as Norma Jean Baker. In fact, Miss Celia's egalitarian treatment of everyone amplifies her virtuous character and reinforces her connection to the famous actress. Remembering how Monroe called out the racist white owner of a club for refusing to let blacks perform there, legendary jazz singer Ella Fitzgerald believed that she owed Monroe a great deal. "She was an unusual woman," Fitzgerald said of Monroe, "a little ahead of her times. And she didn't even know it" (Kniestedt, "How Marilyn Monroe Changed Ella Fitzgerald's Life"). The colorblind kindness Miss Celia extends to Minny brands her as a woman "a little ahead of her times" since Miss Celia subscribes to none of Hilly's vapid racism and sees Minny as her equal. Neither does Miss Celia exploit Minny for her own purposes as Skeeter does with Aibileen. Although she has a penchant for squeezing herself into tacky pink dresses, Miss

Celia surfaces as a compassionate, even contemporary, woman in her active refusal to see black people as cartoonish figures.

Still, the relationship between Minny and Miss Celia mimics the sycophantic relationship Skeeter and Aibileen share. Like Miss Celia, Skeeter is “othered”: Mrs. Phelan alludes to Skeeter’s lesbianism, Stuart deems Skeeter unladylike, and Skeeter’s unruly hair is a constant source of ridicule. But Aibileen operates as the tool Skeeter utilizes to aid her along on her journey of self-discovery. Skeeter finally understands, after writing her book, that fading into domestic oblivion as someone’s wife in Jackson, Mississippi is unfathomable.<sup>20</sup> Thus, Stockett’s depiction of black women reveals that she is not so much writing in the voice of black women as she is utilizing their subjugated experiences as a sounding board for white women to contemplate their own strivings and failings.

Perhaps this is why when black women speak they relegate themselves to pernicious stereotypes. Sitting in her kitchen listening to the radio, Aibileen briefly considers entering a romantic relationship with a man from her church. But remembering that her husband left her for “that no-count hussy up on Farish Street,” Aibileen concludes she “better shut the door for good on that kind a business” (Stockett 26). This moment of self-reflection stirs up images of maids and mammies so ferociously devoted to serving white families that their own pleasure becomes secondary, or simply non-existent. Yet again Aibileen’s desire to essentially seal herself off from pleasure occurs while she is far away from the gaze of her white employers. As Kimberly Wallace-

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<sup>20</sup> My reading of Miss Celia alludes to Toni Morrison’s analysis of Huckleberry Finn and Nigger Jim, as articulated in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*.

Sanders points out, “there is a level of performance in domestic work that is too often overlooked; the more convincing the performance, the more reliable the employment” (74). Aibileen’s decision to fictively sterilize herself is puzzling precisely because there is no incentive for Aibileen to think or behave this way.

In one particularly harrowing scene, Aibileen does not even think to reprimand Mae Mobley after the little girl whacks her “right on the ear” (Stockett 22). Holding Mae Mobley in her arms, Aibileen realizes that her ear is “smarting from [Mae Mobley’s] little fist” but she is “glad she hit me instead a her mama, cause I don’t know what that woman would a done to her” (Stockett 22). To be clear, Mae Mobley’s striking of Aibileen is clearly a result of enduring her own mother’s violent attack; however, the fact that Aibileen does not even reprimand her young charge by at least labeling her actions inappropriate links Aibileen to the pathological black mammy archetype played by Hattie McDaniel and Louise Beavers.

Aibileen’s refusal to gently chastise Mae Mobley is particularly unsettling because her unwavering devotion to Mae Mobley quite literally overshadows her relationship with her own son, Treelore. The scanty details Aibileen provides about Treelore—he liked to read, write, and wore glasses—prove paltry in comparison to the multitude of details Aibileen includes when describing Mae Mobley. Aibileen’s chapter opens with specifics about Mae Mobley’s birth: “Mae Mobley was born on a early Sunday morning in August 1960” (Stockett 1). From the very first pages of *The Help*, then, Aibileen’s status as a mother is illusory as she is a mother to Mae Mobley and the other seventeen children she “raised.” That Treelore appears nearly a full page later and is only discussed for two paragraphs indicates Stockett’s refusal to grant black women

access to motherhood. In a sense, Stockett kills Treelore twice. There is the physical death Treelore suffers after an accident on the loading docks. Then there is the fact that Treelore entirely disappears from the novel, the seventy-nine mentions of Mae Mobley overshadowing the nine Treelore references.<sup>21</sup> When Aibileen does discuss Treelore it is in terms of death and lack. But Treelore's haunting absence—both literally and figuratively—is absolutely necessary as it frees Aibileen up to love Mae Mobley, whom she affectionately refers to her as “my baby.” Tellingly, the healthiest mother-child relationship is the one between Aibileen and her (conveniently) dead son, Treelore. Aibileen's neutered motherhood emphasizes a disturbing trend routinely appearing in *The Help*: Stockett seems unable or unwilling to construct black mothers as loving, hardworking parents.

Even when black mothers appear as relatively decent parents, Stockett immediately demeans these positive maternal figures. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Stockett's depiction of Yule May Crookle. As her last name suggests, Yule May is nothing but a crook who will eventually steal Miss Hilly's ring. While she does so to send her children to college, Yule May's theft proves that despite her college education and well-mannered demeanor she cannot escape her deviant blackness. In Yule May, Stockett incorporates features of the Black Lady archetype. On the surface, the Black Lady appears harmless as this woman is typically represented as well-educated and well-dressed since she “often wears a tailored suit, conservative hairstyle, minimal makeup, and a few well-chose tasteful accessories, such as pearl jewelry. Many white women also

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<sup>21</sup> Wallace-Sanders, Kimberly. “Every Child Left Behind: The Many Invisible Children in *The Help*.” *Southern Cultures* 20, no. 1 (2014): 65-76. Print.

Thankfully, Kimberly Wallace-Sanders first points out the number of times Treelore is mentioned in her article, “Every Child Left Behind: The Many Invisible Children in *The Help*,” 3.

wear these items, but it is the presence of a black female body that changes how they signify and resonate” (Thompson 7). Aibileen’s description of Yule May situates her as the paradigmatic Black Lady:

Yule May. Miss Hilly’s maid, setting in front a me. Yule May easy to recognize from the back cause she got such good hair, smooth, no nap to it. I hear she educated, went through most a college. Course we got plenty a smart people in our church with they college degrees. Doctors, lawyers, Mr. Cross who own *The Southern Times*, the colored newspaper that come out ever week. But Yule May, she probably the most educated maid we got in our parish. (Stockett 245)

However, it is precisely these seemingly positive characteristics—good hair, college education—that signal Yule May’s downfall as her failure to embody the subservient demeanor expected of all black women constitutes her abnormality. Underneath Yule May’s “good hair” and education lies another brazen black woman who commits the cardinal sin of stealing from a white woman. Thus, Yule May ends up exactly where black women like her belong: the state penitentiary. This Black Lady trope surfaces again when Gretchen, Yule May’s cousin, has the audacity to not only question Skeeter’s motives but to label Skeeter a racist. Skeeter’s recollection of Gretchen is particularly interesting here as Skeeter likens her to a white person:

“You think anybody’s ever going to read this thing?” Gretchen laughed. She was trim in her uniform dress. She wore lipstick, the same color pink me and my friends wore. She was young. She spoke evenly and

with care, like a white person. I don't know why, but that made it worse." (Stockett 304-5)

Gretchen's pink lipstick and even voice belie her treacherous blackness. Clearly, it is Gretchen's assertiveness that bothers Skeeter. Interestingly, this is the first time that Stockett inserts a (much-needed) dissenting voice into the novel. After all, why would these black women voluntarily submit their stories to Skeeter at the risk of losing their jobs *and* lives during one of the most turbulent time in US history? By the novel's end, Skeeter is the only one who truly benefits from publishing this book. However, *The Help* never fully reconciles this issue. Stockett silences Gretchen's perspective, fictively punishing her for daring to question a white woman:

"Say it, lady, say the word you think every time one of us comes in the door. Nigger."

Aibileen stood up from her stool. "That's enough, Gretchen. You go on home."

"And you know what, Aibileen? You are just as dumb as she is,"

Gretchen said.

I was shocked when Aibileen pointed to the door and hissed, "You get out a my house."

Gretchen left, but through the screen door, she slapped me with a look so angry it gave me chills. (Stockett 305)

Once again, it is a black woman who steps in to shield a white woman from an entirely valid critique. That Gretchen slaps Skeeter “with a look so angry it [gives her] chills” speaks to Stockett’s configuration of black women who dare speak their mind as the prototypical angry black woman. In a sense, it is almost as if Gretchen employs physical violence here since Skeeter depicting herself as a victim wounded by the malicious stare that a black woman casts her way.

These stereotypical portrayals of black characters epitomize Stockett’s recurrent excursion into black life. White writers’ notoriously romanticized and racist depictions of the antebellum south and enslaved black people, from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* to *Gone with the Wind*, caused Stockett to proceed cautiously. Understanding this tense dynamic, Stockett confessed her fears of writing in the voice of a black woman: “I was scared, a lot of the time, that I was crossing a terrible line, writing in the voice of a black person. I was afraid I would fail to describe a relationship that was so intensely influential in my life, so loving, so grossly stereotyped in American history and literature” (Stockett; *The Help* 529). But the problem is not simply that Stockett is a white woman penning a novel about black women. As Marita Golden asserts in *Skin Deep: Black Women and White Women Write About Race*, “Writers have the right to write about anything” (Golden, “White Writer, Black Characters: Bad Idea?”). The problem is that Stockett houses malicious stereotypes in black characters, emphasizing the decidedly stealthy nature of *The Help* as Minny and Aibileen reinforce notions of blackness as uncontrollable and undesirable. In her postscript to her novel, Stockett expressed her fondness for Skeeter’s hope that her book would unify black and white women: “Wasn’t that the point of the book? For women to realize, *We are just two people. Not that much separates us. Not merely as*



*much as I'd thought*" (Stockett, *The Help*, 530). But Stockett's steady contrasting of black women's reproductive freedoms and sexuality against white women's normalized reproductive habits erects a distinctive line between these two groups of women. It is not just that Stockett utilizes black bodies to spicen (blacken) up what would be, in the absence of Minny and Aibileen, an otherwise bland retelling of southern life amongst malicious Mississippian belles.<sup>22</sup> Stockett's excursus into black life is fraught with contradiction because when black women speak their assertions align perfectly with white women's fears about hyper-sexed black women and abnormally fecund black mothers.

The hallmark of the black woman's hypervisibility underneath the Western white gaze is the overwhelming amount of scrutiny paid to her sexuality and fertility. As Dorothy Roberts asserts in *Killing the Black Body*, "the systematic, institutionalized denial of black women's reproductive freedom has uniquely marked black women's history in America" (4). Thus, Stockett's preoccupation with issues of black women's fertility and sexuality casts yet another glaring spotlight on the nation's fascination with black women's bodies. Therefore, novels like *The Help* necessitate an integrative critical approach that moves beyond a single narrative to explore the multiple systems of interlocking oppressions uniquely impacting black women.

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<sup>22</sup> I am signifying on bell hooks' articulation of "eating the other" as a form of appropriation in *Black Looks: Race and Representation*.

## Conclusion

When Nicki Minaj, the Trinidadian-born American rapper, appeared onstage at the 2015 Video Music Awards she pierced through the lighthearted mood of the evening. After Minaj thanked her fans for their unwavering support, she turned her attention to the host of the award show, Miley Cyrus. Pointing her finger at Cyrus, Minaj reprimanded the pop star: “And now back to this bitch who had a lot to say about me the other day in the press—Miley, what's good?” (Husband, “Yes, Nicki Minaj Called Miley Cyrus ‘This Bitch’ in MTV VMA Acceptance Speech”). Minaj’s very public callout of Cyrus generated a swell of controversy. On Twitter, Black women demanded Salon, an online cultural arts magazine, remove their headline depicting Minaj as the paradigmatic Angry Black Woman: “The Look on Miley’s Face During Nicki’s Savage, Expletive-Laden Rant Says It All” (Becker, “When a ‘Savage’ Nicki Minaj Tweet Goes Off the Rails, It’s No Longer All Fun and Games for PC Police”). Indeed, Salon’s vilification of Minaj as the foul-mouthed savage draws on the Sapphire caricature maligning black women as eye-rolling, neck-snapping, foul-mouthed brutes of the popular white imagination. Salon’s linguistic maneuvering here is particularly deft as portraying Minaj in this way insulates Cyrus from criticism so that she can emerge as an innocent victim ensnared within the crosshairs of yet another angry black woman’s senseless tirade.

In fact, the swiftness with which mainstream media rushed to Cyrus’s defense exposes the singularity of this moment as rooted in Minaj’s reversal of hierarchical power between white and black women. Simply put, a black woman calling a white woman a bitch on national television reverses traditional white supremacist scripts positioning white women as perpetually superior to black women in all things. Highlighting Minaj’s

very public callout of Cyrus's predatory behavior towards black women elucidates the protracted battle between white and black women over issues of identity and agency. Moreover, Minaj's flipping of the proverbial script is the truly spectacular aspect of this moment because she refuses to sanitize her message for the mostly white viewing audience. In fact, Minaj's brazen no-holds barred comments illuminate the significance of the clapback within African American Vernacular English. Creating a witty but blunt rejoinder to "clap back" at one's critics carries particular import within African American communities because it does not allow the offender to get the best of her and asserts one's humanity. This is undoubtedly the reason behind mostly black women, and particularly those on Twitter, hailed Minaj's callout of Cyrus as long overdue. In her Twitter post, Lesa Monroe offered a cautionary word of advice to those within mainstream media: "White girls wanna be us so bad but forgot black girls clap back. No matter the time or place" (Monroe). For the origin of Minaj's ire began after Cyrus told an interviewer that she felt Minaj's thoughts about race were misguided and that the rap artist should temper down her angry tone because she did not "sound too nice." When Minaj later clarified her reasoning for publicly chastising Cyrus she once again held Cyrus accountable for routinely pilfering dance moves, styles, and other forms of black culture from black women while deliberately ignoring the issues affecting black people: "You're in videos with black men, and you're bringing out black women on your stages, but you don't want to know how black women feel about something that's so important?" In pointing her finger at Cyrus, Minaj is quite literally implicating white women as active participants in the continual erasure of black women's humanity.

This is not to dismiss Minaj's problematic hurling of a derogatory term at another woman. As Sara Ahmed explains in "Feminist Killjoys," "it is important that we do not make feminist emotion into a site of truth: as if it is always clear or self-evident that our anger is right. When anger becomes righteous it can be oppressive; to assume anger makes us right can be a wrong" (4). Still, Minaj's scathing reprimand provides a useful optic for exploring anger as a potential source of power. Anger is the tool that Sylvia DuBois turned to when she beat her mistress and gained her freedom. Seeing an opportunity to attack her mistress for all the cruel attacks that she had done to her, DuBois resolved that this would be the last time her mistress degraded her: "Thinks' I, it's a good time now to dress you out, and damned if I won't do it; I set down my tools, and squared for a fight. The first whack, I struck her a hell of a blow with my fist" (Dubois 163). It is this bold and dangerous act—whipping her mistress—that nonetheless imbues Dubois with the bravery needed to finally escape the grips of her slave mistress.

In "The Uses of Anger," Audre Lorde conceptualizes anger as a useful framework for changing women's material lives:

Every woman has a well-stocked arsenal of anger potentially useful against those oppressions, personal and institutional, which brought that anger into being. Focused with precision it can become a powerful source of energy serving progress and change. (128)

As Dubois's account shows, this "well-stocked arsenal of anger" is undoubtedly a powerful mechanism for attaining self-actualization. More than this, black women's

anger amplifies our voices against white supremacist attempts to sanitize our black female perspective.

Melissa Harris-Perry's publicized announcement of her less than amicable split with MSNBC offers another moment to consider the productive uses of black women's anger for combatting more insidious forms of racism. After the network allegedly deliberately sidelined her weekly news show for months, she passionately railed against MSNBC by likening their treatment of her to that of a mammy: "I will not be used as a tool for their purposes. I am not a token, mammy or little brown bobble head" (Mathias, "Melissa Harris- Perry: MSNBC 'Truly Did Not Care about Me'"). Harris-Perry's deliberate invocation of mammy is a powerful one precisely because her utilization of the term immediately incriminates MSNBC for appropriating black people's issues for their own self-serving purposes. In an interview with the hosts of the daytime television show, *The View*, Harris-Perry theorized that her own show and others which featured black were likely the direct result of Barack Obama's successful presidential campaign ("Interview with Melissa Harris-Perry"). With President Obama's ascendancy to the White House, MSNBC's hiring of Harris-Perry was an expedient move that tapped into the nation's sudden desire to see black bodies on television. If Harris-Perry's assessment of MSNBC's employment practices and her eventual firing are accurate, then the moment that Harris-Perry no longer fascinated white viewers she became expendable. Harris-Perry's decision to publicly speak out against MSNBC's exploitative practices before the network could frame her as an ungrateful angry black woman is actually a politically savvy move as it is a calculated choice to expose MSNBC as a network primarily concerned with catering to white male whims and desires. Thus, Harris-Perry's pre-

empting of MSNBC's likely firing of her by not only leaving, but orchestrating the release of an email detailing the network's shady dealings and unfair employment practices carves out a space for her to amplify her voice against white mainstream media juggernauts. Tellingly, Harris-Perry's broadcasting of her version of events in both written and oral form recuperates the black woman's traditionally silenced perspective. In fact, many were shocked when Harris-Perry refused to accept the terms of MSNBC's non-disparagement clause and walked away from what would have most likely been a sizable severance package. In keeping with Harris-Perry's invocation and rejection of the mammy archetype, her rejection of the severance package encourages us to consider how the contemporary imagining of mammy frame her as a woman capable of enjoying a comfortable level of financial security at the cost of their silence. While black women's faces still decorate syrup bottles and pancake boxes, these commodified images conceal the fact that few, if any, real black women were ever paid for the use of the images and recipes.<sup>23</sup> In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a more modern silencing tactic, it seems, is to offer black women money as a means of whitewashing their narratives. Indeed, Harris-Perry's fallout with MSNBC reveals the lengths to which whiteness will go to appropriate black women's experiences and the profitability that this endeavor yields. As Harris-Perry and Minaj show, black women must continuously develop new tactics to mobilize against the various manifestations of white oppression affecting their lives.

Black scholars, too, must develop new theories for understanding the myriad and complex forms of violence enacted onto the bodies and psyches of Black men, women,

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<sup>23</sup> "Nancy Green, the Original Aunt Jemima." The African American Registry. 7 August 2015. Web. Nancy Green, a black woman, was featured on the Aunt Jemima logo and trademarks as early as 1893. While she toured the country as the "Pancake Queen," she was never compensated for her services.

and children. Returning to the plantation household as the site of white women's violence is an important endeavor because it yields insight into the multifaceted layers of enslaved black women's resistance. If the "subject of the dream is the dreamer," then white women's roles in enslaved black women's subjugation bears continued and sustained scrutiny (Morrison; *Playing in the Dark* 17). Mining white women's diaries and journals more clearly reveals black women's attempts to not only wrest control away from their white female oppressors, but also their desires to live vibrantly and in color in spite of their subjugation.

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