

UNIVERSITY OF CANTERBURY

**Jane Crow**

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White Women's Complicity and the Domestic  
Battlefront During the Civil Rights Era.

*"This dissertation is submitted in part fulfillment of the requirements for the degree BA Honours in History at the University of Canterbury. This dissertation is the result of my own work. Material from the published or unpublished work of other historians used in the dissertation is credited to the author of the footnoted references. The dissertation is approximately 9,828 words in length."*

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# Abstract

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The American Civil Rights Movement redresses one of the great injustices in American history: the racial inequality faced by African-Americans. However, the dominant understanding of the challenge to racial injustice is an incomplete one. It largely caters to only the Civil Rights period in the public sphere. The public sphere focused upon men and public events and legislations, while the private sphere was both feminized and centered on the home. In terms of a wider understanding, many historians have failed to account for the home as providing insight into race relations and racial encounters during the Civil Rights era. This dissertation argues the importance of studying the laws of Jim Crow's neglected "other half": Jane Crow. It focuses upon the home and the relationship between African-American domestics and white housewives in terms of the long-standing unjust race-relations in America. Racial discrimination was a dynamic embedded within Southern culture. However, it was concealed through the superficial and external ideology of the Jim Crow laws. These laws advocated the notion of separate but equal, but were ultimately a power mechanism. Jim Crow functioned to segregate African-Americans and whites in a way that constantly reminded African-Americans of their supposed inferiority. This research is conducted through both primary and secondary source material. The primary sources consist of mainly fiction including: novels, a film and an autobiography. These sources offer a window into the private sphere of the home. They showcase racism through exploring the racial interactions in an environment that required intimacy. The secondary material will provide supporting factual

evidence for the themes and ideas found in the primary sources. These will consist of scholarly books, reviews and journal articles.

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# Introduction

The Civil Rights movement ranks as a momentous era within American history: the fight against racial injustice. It is well known for events such as the 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott and figures such as Martin Luther King Jr and Malcolm X. It is the public sphere that dominates an understanding of racism and the challenge to it in America. The dominant understanding of the Civil Rights period and the racism of the time are engrained within and integral to America's history. However, there is also a side of racism enacted within the private sphere that was just as crucial. The home and all its intimate encounters were just as crucial as the racial issues out in the public sphere. The racial interactions in the white suburban home have not been given the acknowledgement that they deserve. Exploring the private sphere of the home revealed many deep-rooted racial "uglies" that were indirect in the public sphere. By focusing upon the intimate encounters between white housewives and African-American domestics, the raw and intimate side of racism is exposed. This racial intimacy could not be concealed through Jim Crow's ironic notion of "separate but equal."<sup>1</sup>

Looking solely to the public sphere to understand the systems and mentalities of racism is inadequate. While the public sphere offers a window into the struggle for racial equality, it tends to only reveal a gendered perspective of the movement. The association of men to the public sphere, and thus the Jim Crow laws, produced an incomplete description and understanding of the Civil Rights era. The Jim Crow system was a power basis that defined the minds and

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<sup>1</sup> C Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 145.

lives of Southerners.<sup>2</sup> It overlaid every human encounter that solidified a persons' racial identity and discouraged intimate encounters between whites and African Americans. This disguised a true understanding of racism. My research examines Jim Crow's "significant other": Jane Crow and the system of racism within the private sphere of the home. Since slavery, historians have found it difficult to capture the voice of those oppressed. This is even more prominent in the case of women, who have traditionally been overlooked and considered ahistorical. In terms of gender, class and race, a female slave's experience was often unable to be recorded or was overlooked. Despite this legacy having improved, many African-American women continued to exist at the bottom of society through race, gender and class. The importance of studying the private sphere and its place in the history of the Civil Rights period exposes the significance of this underexplored territory. Studying the home reveals that the racial encounters in the private sphere actually preserved a racial hierarchy. Because of this, the home must be acknowledged in order to obtain a full understanding of the racism that existed.

Studying the private sphere requires going beyond the traditional historical sources and using literature as a vessel of insight. An analysis of Kathryn Stockett's literary and Tate Taylor's filmic representation of *The Help* is the marrow of the dissertation. Anne Moody's autobiography, *Coming of Age in Mississippi* and Alice Childress' text *Like One of the Family: Conversations from a Domestic's life* serve as supporting primary sources, reinforcing the themes and ideas raised within *The Help*. The home was traditionally understood as a

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<sup>2</sup> Jason Sokol, *There Goes my Everything: White Southerners in the Age of Civil Rights, 1945-1975* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 3.

woman's realm, where only domestic tasks occurred. In traditional history domesticity was considered less important to the public sphere and not worth historical mention.<sup>3</sup> The socially constructed public and private spheres designated men and women to their apparently appropriate realms. These gendered environments enforced the dominance of men and the secondary, unimportant role of women. As the Civil Rights movement was predominantly considered a public event tied to legislations, movements and protests, the historical documentations and sources mainly focused upon this domain. In turning to literature as a means of insight, women's agency during the Civil Rights era is unmasked.

Literature holds such force in history and is able to reveal racism in the home. It exposes ironies, power mechanisms, and an intensification of racial issues. Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*,<sup>4</sup> is a prime example of the power of literature. Stowe's text so fervently pulled at the heartstrings of all who read it, that upon meeting Stowe President Lincoln exclaimed: "So this is the little woman who made the big war".<sup>5</sup> Texts can be revolutionary. Its revolution is most apparent when it can convey the underexplored and often disregarded side of history. This is not to say that the primary sources in this dissertation revolutionized the Civil Rights period. However, they do reveal the significance of racism in the home and should be seriously considered. Fiction can expose the importance of what Marxist historian E.P Thompson understood as being history

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<sup>3</sup> Nannerl Keohane, preface in *Gendered Domains: Rethinking Public and Private in Women's History: Essays from the Seventh Berkshire Conference on the History of Women* ed. Susan M. Reverby and Dorothy O. Helly. (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1992), xi.

<sup>4</sup> Stowe, Harriet Beecher, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

<sup>5</sup> Glenda Matthews, *The Rise of Public Woman: Woman's Power and Woman's Place in the United States 1630-1970* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 88.

from below.<sup>6</sup> Studying the marginalized lives of ordinary people exposes an element of truth in everyday human life. As Michel Foucault asserted: “Now one could agree the notion of truth in fiction is credible”.<sup>7</sup>

The methodology regarding this dissertation largely relies upon fiction to awaken a multitude of racial ironies within the home. The nature of these primary sources must be acknowledged in regards to the perspective and angle they possess. *The Help* and *Coming of Age in Mississippi* are situated in the deeply racist South, while *Like One of the Family* is set in New York. *The Help* comes from the perspective of both African-American domestics and a white woman named Skeeter. Stockett’s use of first person exposes the personal thoughts and first-hand accounts of her characters. However, it must be noted that the writing of Skeeter’s book facilitates an interaction between African-Americans and whites. Domestic maids attempt to tell a woman, whose skin colour symbolizes their oppression, about the reality of working for a white woman like herself. Despite this relationship, *The Help* is the vehicle of the dissertation. This is because it has the ability to allow insight into the under explored racism within the home. *Coming of Age in Mississippi* and *Like One of The Family* come directly from the narrators. This enables a more unfiltered account. Together, these primary sources access the uncharted territory of racism.

The questions posed to the sources focus upon: the role of complicit white women, predominantly residing in the South. It questions their response to the Civil Rights movement and the methods that white women used to enforce inferiority onto African-American women, showing an attempted continuation of

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<sup>6</sup> This idea is expressed consistently throughout E.P. Thompson’s text: *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1974).

<sup>7</sup> Robert Nola, *Foucault* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 8.

the master-slave relationship; how the home can act as a tool of racial discrimination and segregation, offering insight into the era of segregation and all the concealed ironies within Jim Crow. The cross overs between private and public racial issues and relations expressed within the private sphere will also be a focal point of inquiry; alongside the difficulties and constraints faced by both African-American and white women due to their attempts to better racial norms and issues. Using literature has its own limitations and requires factual sources to support the themes raised. A trend within the historiography regarding this dissertation acknowledges the underexplored nature of racism in the home. However, it nonetheless emphasizes the intensity of racism. Drawing upon elements of gender, the cult of domesticity, the presence of domestic ideologies, ironies, Jim Crow, intimacy and hygiene, scholars present the home as a sphere full of racial ironies, paradoxes and deep-rooted corruptness. These elements are exposed through Jane Crow's interactions, not Jim Crow's separations.

Jane Crow, who exists in the home, showcases how a Southern Belle invested implicit trust in a woman they believe to be inferior, dirty and diseased, to intimately enter and work in her home. Yet this so called dirty and inferior woman could not use the same bathroom or eat at the same table as the white housewife and her family. Ironically and paradoxically, it was considered unhygienic and unsafe. Perhaps the domestic may have transmitted a disease to the family whose home they enter everyday. Perhaps it was too unhygienic and risky to eat at the same table with the very woman who just prepared Sunday lunch. This is the crux here: the racism enacted by complicit white housewives verges on parody, but was fabricated and constructed to be factual based upon the Jim Crow Laws. Jim Crow was undoubtedly a power mechanism imbued

within every Southern interaction. It reinforced the constructed inferiority onto African-Americans, whilst ironically proclaiming them to be an equal race. It is only through the interactions and relationships enacted within the home, where Jim Crow was so deeply toxic, that an attempted continuation of the master-slave relationship is exposed. Jane Crow reveals how racial integration in the home ironically meant the preservation of white superiority and African-American inferiority. She strips away the fabric that concealed the true sickness and mentalities that orchestrated racism.

## Setting the Scene

*The Help*, in both its literary and filmic representations undercuts the assumption of the dominance of the public sphere. While the film has an array of critiques, such as it being seen as “too safe” on such a volatile subject,<sup>8</sup> its popularity in Hollywood remains important. Reportedly, worldwide the box office hit earned \$213,120,004.<sup>9</sup> The prominence of digital sources as a form of historiography meant the film was easily accessible and available. The wide reception of the film prompted its success. It exposes and captures the importance of the racism in the home. Despite being a popular spectacle, the film evokes new questions regarding a whole host of familiar racial themes and issues relevant to the time.

A scene in the film: the moment when African-American domestic maid Yule May is arrested and struck by a police officer depicts the typically assumed

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<sup>8</sup> Roger Ebert, “The Help Movie Review & Film Summary (2011) | Roger Ebert,” accessed September 5, 2014, <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-help-2011>.

<sup>9</sup> The Numbers: Where Data and Business Meet,” Nash Information Services LLC, 1997-2014, accessed October 14, 2014, <http://www.the-numbers.com/movie/Help-The#tab=box-office>

perceptions of racial injustice.<sup>10</sup> Yule May's arrest recalls and is a reminder of the famous arrest of Rosa Parks, one of the dominant images of the Civil Rights movement. The scene undoubtedly reveals the racial hierarchy in America, specifically Jackson, Mississippi. However, both in the film and reality, this is not the sole element of racial injustice, nor is it the most significant. Stockett's text, which Taylor reinforces visually, exposes an overlooked area when exploring Jim Crow and the Civil Rights movement: the interactions and intimacy of white and African-American women in the home. Following the end of the Second World War, historian Paula Giddings states there was a recalling of gender roles that emphasized women's place in the home.<sup>11</sup> However, African-American women were excluded from this recall. The need to financially support their family consequently meant that they had work.<sup>12</sup> Through the lack of opportunities available to them, many were forced to work as domestic servants for white families. As a result, the home was an environment that fused together domestic service and race relations.<sup>13</sup> The intimate encounters between white and African-American women uncovered the relationship between racism and power.

Through Skeeter's novel, the *Help*, the reality of what it is like to really be a domestic helper in the white family's home is revealed. Skeeter's recording of the encounters between African-American domestics and white housewives reveals the core of racism. Anne Moody's autobiography *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, exposed racism within the home. Her own encounters with her

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<sup>10</sup> *The Help*, directed by Tate Taylor (2011; Beverly Hills, CA: Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2012), DVD.

<sup>11</sup> Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1985), 244.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 245.

<sup>13</sup> David M. Katzman, *Seven Days a Week: Women and Domestic Service in Industrializing America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 185.

employer, Mrs. Burke, illustrate the power of the white women. Moody's coming of age, took place during her time working for Burke. It was in Burke's home, where she experienced what it was like to truly feel inferior.<sup>14</sup> Considerably unconventional, is Alice Childress' *Like one of the Family: Conversations from the Life of a Domestic*. The text proves extremely useful in debunking the myths and assumptions of the domestic's role. Childress uses her protagonist Mildred to expose the very idea of a domestic being *like* one of the family as a complete irony.<sup>15</sup> These sources enable an insight into the world of Jane Crow. They offer a new dimension to the racism that marshaled American culture in the public and private spheres.

Crucial to both versions of *The Help*, *Coming of Age in Mississippi* and *Like One of the Family* is the conveying of the intimacy, irony and power dynamics between white mistresses and African-American domestic maids. Historian Judith Rollins in her work on African-American domestics supports this by correctly arguing that domestic work was predominantly recognized as a gendered experience.<sup>16</sup> The domestic's experience of racism was due to the racial attitudes and private feelings harboured and projected by white women in the home. Academic Grace Elizabeth Hale uses white and anti-suffragette woman Mildred Rutherford to illustrate the importance of women and the home in the orchestrating of racism.<sup>17</sup> Rutherford's desire to preserve the culture of the old South lies in the home, claiming: "If there is a power placed in any hands, it is the

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<sup>14</sup> Anne Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (New York: Bantam Dell, 1968), 27-32.

<sup>15</sup> Alice Childress, *Like One of the Family: Conversations from a Domestic's Life* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 2.

<sup>16</sup> Judith Rollins, *Between Women: Domesticity and their Employers*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1985).

<sup>17</sup> Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), 86.

power that is placed in the Southern woman in her home! That power is great enough to direct legislative bodies”<sup>18</sup> White women:“ the keepers of Southern culture”<sup>19</sup> played a crucial role in the preservation of the racial superiority and traditions of the past. Conflating the image of the plantation home with the emerging suburban home was a key way the white women preserved slavery’s legacy.<sup>20</sup> It is here that Jane Crow thrived.

Stockett and Tate so deeply reveal the intimate accounts within the home. They rightly expose it as a key environment between African-American domestics and their white employers. Jim Crow is exposed to not be about separation, but rather power and the ability to perpetuate and enforce racial inferiority and inequality onto African-Americans. Rebecca Sharpless in her studies on the relations between domestics and employers within the private sphere convincingly shows that the white suburban home incorporated an abundance of contradictions.<sup>21</sup> These contradictions were shown through the ironic relationship between employer and domestic; a relationship filled with power, dependence, deference, care, love, and hate.<sup>22</sup> Scholar Elaine Tyler May also speaks of the contradictory environment in the white home. She rightly claims that white Americans were strongly disapproving of racial integration in private spaces.<sup>23</sup> This disapproving was most strongly felt and articulated within the most intimate realm of one’s life: the family and by extension, the home.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 86-87.

<sup>21</sup> Rebecca Sharpless, *Cooking in Other Women’s Kitchens: Domestic Workers in the South, 1865-1960: Domestic Workers in the South, 1865-1960* (Google Books: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 119.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War era* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), xx.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

Anne Moody during her experience as a domestic maid for Mrs. Burke, states that the white home had come to mean many things to her: "It symbolized hatred, love and fear in many variations", causing her both anxiety and fear.<sup>25</sup> Moody's experiences and struggles growing up as an African-American in the Deep South were most strongly realized during her time as a domestic maid. During her time working for Mrs. Burke, Moody gained a new insight into the very essence of racism.<sup>26</sup> Burke constantly attempted to both subdue Moody and solidify her inferior status.<sup>27</sup> One of Burke's multiple attempts to subdue Moody was done by highlighting the danger of disrespecting a white woman.<sup>28</sup> Burke discussed with Moody the brutal murder of fourteen-year-old African-American Emmett Till, who was killed "because he got out of his place with a white woman."<sup>29</sup> Because of this insinuation, Moody was reminded of the danger posed to her in standing up for herself. She stated:

For the first time out of all her trying, Mrs. Burke had made me feel like rotten garbage. Many times she had tried to instill fear within me and subdue me [...] when she talked about Emmett Till there was something in her voice that sent chills and fear all over me.<sup>30</sup>

Moody revealed it was during her time in Burke's home that gave her her first racial awakening and confrontation.<sup>31</sup> Burke can be considered Moody's key

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<sup>25</sup> Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, 163.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 122-127.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

racial antagonist throughout the text. Her attempts to subdue Moody, alongside Moody's "awareness" of her subordinate place in society were materialized through her time as a domestic worker.<sup>32</sup> By looking at the relationship between white housewives and African-American domestics, the home can be understood as an environment that forced racial intimacy. It exposed the racist attitudes towards African-Americans and the core of Southern race relations.

The distaste towards racial integration already exposes a paradox: the white home was one of the few spheres that white and African-American women came into contact with one another.<sup>33</sup> Both versions of *The Help* are full of racial intimacy. The domestic sphere, which constitutes racial intimacy between women exposes a crucial element of racism that was hidden: the interactions. The ignoring of the racial intimacy in the home is tied to the androcentric framework that made women seem ahistorical. The androcentric framework is defined as a structure that "makes everything male appear the neutral norm".<sup>34</sup> This framework is integral to understanding why women's role, and the private sphere of the home have been ignored. Traditionally, the androcentric framework designated men and women to their gendered spaces. Men were considered the most important sex; and their existence in the public sphere constructed them as the makers of history. Despite the androcentric, the domestic sphere strongly contributed towards the Jim Crow laws, and the meaning of segregation and whiteness.<sup>35</sup> However, history has largely failed in viewing the home as a crucial racial environment and acknowledging women,

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 127.

<sup>33</sup> Susan Tucker, "A Complex Bond: Southern Black Domestic Workers and Their White Employers," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 9.3 (1987): 7.

<sup>34</sup> Judy Root Aulette, Judith Wittner, and Kristin Blakely, *Gendered Worlds*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 49.

<sup>35</sup> Hale, *Making Whiteness*, 88.

who reviewer C.A Wolski states were largely responsible for: “the ugliness that underlies the system”.<sup>36</sup> Within this domestic environment the ironies, paradoxes and depth of racism is uncovered. The encounters of complicit white women and African-American domestics fully exposed the notion of “separate but equal” as a power mechanism of not separation, but inequality.

## The Home

The white suburban home is largely an unexplored territory. Its environment was key for the production of racial identity. It possessed integration within a segregated world.<sup>37</sup> The encounters between domestics and white women defined the most intimate point of racial contact in the South.<sup>38</sup> The home acts as a tool of racial discrimination and segregation. It shows the various rules and power mechanisms at play within the culture of segregation.<sup>39</sup> This established and enforced racial inferiority onto African-American employees.

The various jobs of the domestic maid in the white home expose the private sphere as a territory that paradoxically encompassed intimacy and separation. Aibileen, although a fictional character, is emblematic of so many African-American domestic workers. She articulates at the beginning of both the movie and the text that her role was an intimate one. Aibileen: “Taking care a

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<sup>36</sup> C. A. Wolski, “The Help,” *The Objective Standard: A Journal of Culture and Politics* 6.4 (January 1, 2011): 75.

<sup>37</sup> Hale, *Making Whiteness*, 94.

<sup>38</sup> Katzman, *Seven Days a Week*, 185.

<sup>39</sup> Sharpless, *Cooking in Other Women's Kitchens*, 119.

white babies, that's what I do, along with all the cooking and cleaning."<sup>40</sup> This quote reveals the work that domestic helpers did in the home: attending to and interacting with the white woman, her home and children. However, these interactions were conducted in a way that forced the domestic to recognize her racial difference and inferiority.<sup>41</sup> This produces a complex relationship. It involves looking at women who were in frequent contact with one another but were separated by race and class.<sup>42</sup> The power mechanisms put in place demanded the presence of the domestic in a way that required them to acknowledge their inferiority and conform to the gendered segregation in the home.

When Aibileen narrates her views on the portrayal of shame, she claims: "Shame ain't black."<sup>43</sup> Shame and ugliness, was not being African-American, but rather being made to feel ashamed of not being white due to discriminatory power structures.<sup>44</sup> Aibileen then states: "Shame be the color of a new white uniform"<sup>45</sup>. Wearing a domestic uniform signified class and status in the home. It indicated that the maid was viewed as property. When put on, the uniform carried with it the expectations of submissive mannerisms. Sharpless supports this notion through her claim that the domestic uniform, being worn in the white home, ostracized and indicated difference between a domestic and the white family.<sup>46</sup> It was also a form of subordination. The plain unflattering uniform

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<sup>40</sup> Stockett, *The Help*, 1.

<sup>41</sup> Sharpless, *Cooking in Other Women's Kitchens*, 131-32.

<sup>42</sup> Tucker, "A Complex Bond: Southern Black Domestic Workers and Their White Employers," 6.

<sup>43</sup> Stockett, *The Help*, 151.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Sharpless, *Cooking in Other Women's Kitchens*, 134.

made the domestic look like a household object and: “part of the home décor”.<sup>47</sup> It was a visual marker of the domestic being considered like property, recalling the slave past. Elizabeth also refers to Aibileen as “my Aibileen” making it seem like she’s owns her and therefore has the right to answer and make decisions for her.<sup>48</sup> The irony within claiming ownership over Aibileen, which is symbolic of all the other domestics, is apparent. To have ownership, a clear legacy of slavery, over something indicates a personal tie to that very thing. There is such a personal tie and implicit trust that the Jackson housewives have in their domestic maids. They allow them into their home, a territory that is so proudly theirs. However, the domestic is not warmly welcomed into the white home. They entered this sphere wearing their uniform as the first and foremost marker of their difference. Ultimately, the uniform signified the purpose and status of the African-American in the white home.

Throughout *The Help* the irony of the power mechanisms present in the home expose the contradictions at play. Minny Jackson reflects back within the novel to the time when she was fourteen years old. This was before her first day as a domestic, when her mother was informing her of the rules that she must abide by within the white women’s home. Minny’s mother taught her the ins and outs of being a domestic.<sup>49</sup> These rules included the domestic help minding her own business, being there to work only, because: “white people are not your friends, they don’t want to hear about it.”<sup>50</sup> Other rules laid out to Minny include to never let a white employer catch her using their bathroom; to use the same cutlery and crockery everyday and store it away from the rest of the of the eating

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Stockett, *The Help*, 78.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 38.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

dishes; to eat in the kitchen; never to hit a white woman's child; and to never answer back, or "sass mouth", a white woman.<sup>51</sup> There is no mention of the white male in this passage; the power and authority is exclusive to the white woman. In the home, they were able to exert their own power through racism.<sup>52</sup> Sharpless states the kitchen was both a place of intimacy and isolation for the domestic worker.<sup>53</sup> Characters such as Aibileen were ironically made to feel familiar within their workspace, but never comfortable or at ease. The home was paradoxically both their workspace and a racist territory.

The cooking and preparing of meals is emblematic of the irony within the white home. It exposes paradox of hygiene. Domestics were responsible for cooking meals for their white employers, but then being unable to touch the food afterwards, or eat in the dining room with the white family.<sup>54</sup> This was a power mechanism put in place by white women. Minny tells her daughter Sugar that when serving coffee to a white person to always place it on the table in front on them "cos yer hands can't touch".<sup>55</sup> The irony in these rules is so apparent. Forbidding the domestic to further touch the food she had just prepared rendered her inferior, indicating her only purpose is to serve. However, there are never any domestics who openly articulate this irony. The domestics appear to be accustomed to these racist rules, as there is a clear need for them to remain silent and ignorant to the injustices and ironies that they faced. The domestic had to serve the white woman, who then denied her the right to further handle the food she has already prepared, due to her apparent unhygienic nature. Forcing

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 38-39.

<sup>52</sup> Rollins, *Between Women*, 91.

<sup>53</sup> Sharpless, *Cooking in Other Women's Kitchens*, 131.

<sup>54</sup> Taylor, *The Help*, (2011).

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

the domestic to work in a way that constantly reminded her of her inferior status exposes of the power, irony and paradoxes in the home. The performance of Jim Crow within such an intimate environment stressed the need of white women to enforce the laws of segregation as a way to enforce racism and racial difference in such environment that linked the past to the present.

## Methods of Domination

The home constituted the domain in which the housewife demonstrated loyalty and devotion to Jim Crow. It was here that she utilized various modes of domination to establish and render the African-American domestic as inferior. Racial stereotypes were one way that white housewives exerted dominance over domestics. Both Stockett and Tate uncover this power mechanism. Aibileen submissively acknowledges, and conforms to the way she is made to feel by Hilly Holbrooke. Holbrooke, the key antagonist, exposes the use of racial exploitation. While waiting on the members of Sunday Bridge club (a white social club for the select middle class Jackson females), Aibileen listens to a conversation between Hilly and Elizabeth. Hilly, although in apparent discomfort, refuses to use any of the Leefolts' bathrooms.<sup>56</sup> Hilly's justification for not using the bathroom is because "the help" also uses the same facility.<sup>57</sup> Hilly's mother, Mrs. Walters, so boldly asserts: "She's upset cos the Nigra uses the inside bathroom and so do we."<sup>58</sup> Aibileen does not respond at all to this, as she "learned to keep it down a

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<sup>56</sup> Stockett, *The Help*, 7.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

long time ago.”<sup>59</sup> Her repression of her true feelings reveals the legacy of African-Americans acting out their racial stereotypes, such as the “mammy” or the “sambo”<sup>60</sup>. These stereotypes showed slaves as happy in their roles and loyal to their master. Rosa Parks states that when African-Americans violated these roles, many whites became angered as it challenged the notion African-Americans were content in their roles and place in society.<sup>61</sup> These images of African-Americans constructed and perpetuated by whites served to maintain a racial hierarchy.

White women also used pseudoscience and racial hygiene as modes of domination. Hilly and Elizabeth continue their conversation regarding separated bathrooms and a bill Hilly has established called the “Home Help Sanitation Initiative”.<sup>62</sup> She claims this to be a “disease-preventative measure.”<sup>63</sup> Hilly explains how the bill requires every white household to have a separate bathroom for coloured workers. She claims she is taking the appropriate measures to protect her town, seeing the sharing of bathrooms between white and coloured people as “just plain dangerous” because: “Everybody knows they carry different diseases than we do.”<sup>64</sup> This passage encapsulates discrimination on such a personal and insulting level, with Aibileen having to listen to a derogatory conversation regarding her as unhygienic. Not only this, but it also exposes Hilly’s use of pseudoscience on racial hygiene and the utmost irony of the situation itself. Not exclusive to America, was a global, colonial and racial

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 9.

<sup>60</sup> Stanley Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1968) 82-83.

<sup>61</sup> James Haskins and Rosa Parks, *Rosa Parks: My Story* (New York: Puffin, 1999), 28.

<sup>62</sup> Stockett, *The Help*, 9.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 8-9.

anxiety of the different diseases carried by those races considered inferior.<sup>65</sup> This western mentality preserved a class and racial hierarchy.

Later on in the text Hilly's advertisement for her "disease preventative measure",<sup>66</sup> which Skeeter is to type up in the League newsletter (a women's charity group orchestrated by Hilly), indicates the white women's ability to use spatial control in such an intimate environment. This remains key to the ideas of racial hygiene as a way to reinforce racial difference and superiority. Hilly's advocating for her initiative includes the following facts:

*99% of all colored diseases are carried in the urine*

*Whites can become permanently disabled by nearly all of these diseases*

*because we lack immunities coloreds carried in their darker pigmentation*

*Some germs carried by whites can also be harmful to coloreds*

*Protect yourself. Protect your children. Protect your help.*<sup>67</sup>

Here, the lines dividing the public and private spheres are dissolved. Hilly's initiative indicates the capacity of women to also enforce segregation within the very space where a lot of African-American women occupied and worked.

Upon reading Hilly's initiative, Skeeter notes: "*Jim Crow or Hilly's bathroom plan – what's the difference?*"<sup>68</sup> Hilly's negotiation of space shows that domestics such as Aibileen were forced to recognize their inferiority by being

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<sup>65</sup> Alison Bashford, *Imperial Hygiene: A Critical History of Colonialism, Nationalism and Public Health* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 105.

<sup>66</sup> Stockett, *The Help*, 8.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*, 158. Originally quoted in italics.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid*, 174.

prohibited from using a bathroom that their job forced them to come into contact with on a daily basis. Segregation was not only required within the public sphere due to the Jim Crow laws, but also within the private realm. White women, whose authority was rooted in the home, exhibited their own form loyalty to Jim Crow.<sup>69</sup> Although the home was considered private and devoid of the rules in the public sphere, there is a clear crossover of the two, with the rules of segregation transcending the legislations and politics.<sup>70</sup> Southern housewives forced African-American domestics to recognize their apparent difference and inferiority. It seemed that the more intimate the racial interactions were, white women felt a greater need to enforce inequality. By performing close contact duties in the home, the domestic, despite being depended upon by her employer, was made to feel unwelcome. It was a hostile reminder of her separateness and inferiority.

## Language is Power

Language played a crucial role in perpetuating racism in the home. Many white housewives used it as a tool of control and domination to subordinate, patronize and ostracize domestic employees.<sup>71</sup> Whenever there is any dialogue between a domestic and a white woman in *The Help*, Aibileen and all the other domestics address her with the title of Miss, like that of Miss Leefolt, or Miss Hilly.<sup>72</sup> In return, the domestic is only spoken to in their first name, and in the presence of other white women, employers would often use terms such as the

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<sup>69</sup> Sharpless, *Cooking in Other Women's Kitchens*, 123.

<sup>70</sup> Stockett, *The Help*, 174.

<sup>71</sup> Rebecca, *Cooking in Other Women's Kitchens*, 131.

<sup>72</sup> Taylor, *The Help* (2011).

maid, or Nigra.<sup>73</sup> Anne Moody also noted the role language played as a means of subordination. During her time as a domestic, firstly working for Mrs. Burke's daughter, Linda Jean, Moody had addressed her by her first name.<sup>74</sup> Upon learning of how she addressed Linda Jean, Burke indignantly confronted Moody, stating: "Is *that* what you call Mrs. Jenkins – Linda Jean?"<sup>75</sup> Following this, Burke made a constant point to emphasize the title of "Mrs." when referring to herself and Linda Jean.<sup>76</sup> By forcing Moody to address both Linda Jean and herself using the title Mrs., Burke enforced her apparent supremacy and attempted to subdue Moody. This reminded domestics of their inferior status, role and purpose in the white home. Subordination through language occurred regardless of one's age. Aibileen's age means nothing in terms of respect to her employer Elizabeth, who "ain't but twenty-three years old and like hearing herself tell me what to do."<sup>77</sup> By constructing and reinforcing the hierarchal relationship between domestic and employer, white women established and reinforced themselves as racially and intellectually superior.

The patronizing manner that many domestics were spoken to aided in the idea African-Americans lacked intelligence. By treating the domestic as if they were of childlike intelligence, housewives were able to act as if they were really caring for the women they sought to subdue. Mildred, the protagonist from Childress' text *Like One of the Family*, notes the patronizing manner that she is spoken to in. Mildred reveals that when one of her employers, Mrs. C, has guests over, she purposefully patronizes Mildred with statements such as "Mildred

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, 93.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 95.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, 95, 120.

<sup>77</sup> Stockett, *The Help*, 3.

dear, be sure to eat *both* of your lamb chops for your lunch!”<sup>78</sup> This demeaning of domestics appears as a trend in the primary sources. Also apparent in *The Help* Skeeter notices how both Hilly and Elizabeth address Aibileen by raising their voices “three octaves higher” and smiling as they speak.<sup>79</sup> Sharpless states many white mistresses, reinforcing the differences between the races, chose to treat the domestic like a child and of child like intelligence.<sup>80</sup> By doing this, the housewife was able to further exert her superior status and justify exploiting the domestic.

The way in which Hilly and Elizabeth address the domestic maids also carries with it the expectation of a submissive and agreeing response. This is illustrated when Hilly says to Aibileen, “Aibileen, you like having your own toilet, don’t you?”<sup>81</sup> Despite, on surface level the fact that it appears to be a question, Hilly of course expects and knows Aibileen will be in complete agreement. Conforming to and accepting this form of racism meant that the domestic accepted her designated role and inferior status.<sup>82</sup> By addressing the domestic as she would a child, the white women exerted a false maternal and nurturing role over the domestic, while simultaneously belittling them. A constant expectation stemmed from the white women that the domestic, who she seen as clearly inferior, would always act both meekly and obediently.<sup>83</sup> This shows the unjust control and domination white women were able to enact over their employee’s

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<sup>78</sup> Childress, *Like One of the Family: Conversations from a Domestic's Life*, 1.

<sup>79</sup> Stockett, *The Help*, 157.

<sup>80</sup> Sharpless, *Cooking in Other Women's Kitchens*, 124.

<sup>81</sup> Stockett, *The Help*, 185.

<sup>82</sup> A. S. Barnes, “White Mistresses and African-American Domestic Workers: Ideals for Change,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 66.1 (1993): 22–36.

<sup>83</sup> Sharpless, *Cooking in Other Women's Kitchens*, 119.

lives.<sup>84</sup> The language used by white women expressed their ability to subordinate and dominate the domestic. By exploiting the power of language to subdue and patronize the domestic, the housewife continued her position of power.

## Mothers and Mammies

The role that many domestics played in raising white children reveals how white housewives placed racial stereotypes upon them. These stereotypes buttressed and defended the exploitation and subordination of domestics.<sup>85</sup> However, it also exposed the implicit trust that the housewife invested in the very woman whom they refused to share a bathroom with. The child's innocent gaze, particularly in literature, exposes the unjust and ironic racism perpetuated by white adults.

The mammy figure represented an African-American woman who was a nanny for white children. She was mythologized to be both illiterate and inherently maternal. It was these traits that endeavoured to preserve the racial hierarchy in America. Scholar Christopher Sewell explores the significance of the mammy, stating:

Images of Black motherhood and domesticity have been a specific point of interest and contention since the time of slavery. Since then, the Black female body, marked by society and conceptions of what it is and

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Katzman, *Seven Days a Week*, 187.

embodies, continues to operate in the hegemonic order that defines America.<sup>86</sup>

Using the mammy myth prescribed to slavery's continuing legacy of romanticizing the African-American's unmerited status. It fabricated them to be happy and suited to their carved out roles. Anne Moody depicts how her employer Linda Jean brought in to the idea of the domestic having a mammy like quality. Despite Moody only being an adolescent, Linda Jean assumed Moody knew more about children and often asked her for advice.<sup>87</sup> Linda Jean perpetuated the mammy stereotype by treating Moody as if she was the figure of authority in rearing and raising children.<sup>88</sup> In doing this, she ironically placed a negative, racist and degrading stereotype upon Moody, yet was willing to take advice from her.

Many white women did not trust their domestic maids in terms of theft and hygiene and also doubted their intellect. Ironically though, they trusted the domestic to look after their developing children. Scholar David Katzman highlights this irony, stating: "Negro women were called childish and incompetent, yet they reared Southern white children."<sup>89</sup> Stockett and Tate explore the bond between the domestic maid and white child. Aibileen and Elizabeth's daughter, Mae Mobley, encapsulate this bond. Aibileen states her focal role is taking care of children, already having raised seventeen white

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<sup>86</sup> Christopher Sewell, "Mammies and Matriarchs: Tracing Images of the Black Female in Popular Culture 1950s to Present," *Journal of African American Studies* 17 (2012): 308, accessed October 9, 2014, doi:10.1007/s12111-012-9238-x.

<sup>87</sup> Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, 94.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> Katzman, *Seven Days a Week*, 189.

babies.<sup>90</sup> Her familiarity with how to raise a child, an image feeding into the myth of the mammy, is apparent through the bond she shares with Mae Mobley. Their relationship appears far stronger than the bond that Elizabeth and Mae Mobley share. The closeness between the two characters is illustrated within the text when Mae Mobley, who chooses to spend all her time with Aibileen, openly states: “Aibee you’re my real mumma.”<sup>91</sup> Coming from such a young gaze, Mae Mobley’s statement shows the innocence of childhood. At such a young age, the child does not fully assimilate the programmed racist culture of the adult world and exposes that racism is not inherent, but learnt. Mae Mobley’s innocent mind is capable of love despite the rules of racism that orchestrates Jackson society. Her young untarnished mind is yet to view Aibileen as inferior to her, having not yet had her mind moulded through racial discourses. She is yet to become racially programmed like her mother and the majority of white Southerners and view race as: “an axis of differentiation.”<sup>92</sup>

This child’s inability to grasp Jim Crow ideologies exposes the unjust and power orientated nature of racism. Stockett and Tate utilize the child’s gaze to expose how deeply unjust and power-driven Jim Crow was. Aibileen, despite having her own separate bathroom, is responsible for teaching Mae Mobley to use the toilet. This however, takes place within Aibileen’s own segregated bathroom.<sup>93</sup> Following this, in front of Elizabeth, Mae Mobley innocently runs to use Aibileen’s bathroom and is scolded by her mother, telling her off for trying to

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<sup>90</sup> Stockett, *The Help*, 1.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid*, 284.

<sup>92</sup> Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 138.

<sup>93</sup> Stockett, *The Help*, 94.

use an apparently dirty place, where she will “catch diseases”.<sup>94</sup> Mae Mobley’s attempt to use Aibileen’s bathroom shows she sees no difference in either of the bathrooms: they are simply just bathrooms. As is the case with Aibileen and Elizabeth: to Mae Mobley, they are both simply just people. However, it is Aibileen who raises Mae Mobley and nurtures her. Ironically though, Mae Mobley, who sees no wrong is doing so, is not allowed to use the same bathroom as the woman who she considers to be her mother. Under Aibileen, who is aware of how durable the young mind can be as children grow up, Mae Mobley sees the difference between people not based upon race, but love and contempt.<sup>95</sup>

Mae Mobley’s discouraged love for Aibileen reveals the unwarranted disgust that many Southerners had for African-Americans. Aibileen tells Mae Mobley each day, and gets her to repeat: “You is smart, you is kind, you is important,”<sup>96</sup> in comparison to Elizabeth, who shows distaste for her own child,<sup>97</sup> refusing to even pick her up throughout the day.<sup>98</sup> Mae Mobley idolizes Aibileen because of the love and attention she gives her. When asked at pre-school to draw the thing she likes most about herself, Mae Mobley coloured herself black.<sup>99</sup> Confused as to why she got in trouble with her teacher, Mae Mobley confesses to Aibileen: “”She said black means I got a dirty, bad face,” She [Mae Mobley] plant her face in her pillow and cry something awful.”<sup>100</sup> Her confusion at getting into trouble for self-expression and using what she considers to be an ordinary bathroom reveals Jim Crow was centered on

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid, 91.

<sup>96</sup> Taylor, *The Help*.

<sup>97</sup> Stockett, *The Help*, 90.

<sup>98</sup> Taylor, *The Help*.

<sup>99</sup> Stockett, *The Help*. 409.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

enforcing inferiority and inequality, not merely separation. The figure of the child and their uncultivated gaze has a young organic mind, which does not yet: “think through race”<sup>101</sup>. Their untarnished view of the world exposes the unjust and fervent racial dynamics in the home. By utilizing the figure of a white child who has been ironically raised in a white home by an African-American domestic, paradoxes are exposed. The child, who was yet to understand societal and racial norms, loved their domestic regardless of their class and race. Their innocent gaze reveals just how unjust, unnatural and paradoxical the notion of separate but equal really was.

## The Power of White Women

The exclusive power of the well-to-do white housewife rested in her capacity to damage the economic wellbeing and prosperity of the domestic. Her power did not only affect African-Americans. It transcended races and was able to damage the reputation of a fellow white woman. Aibileen accounts for the difference between how a white man and a white woman assert power and seek revenge.<sup>102</sup> While a woman is unlikely to physically harm you: “They got a shiny little set a tools they use, sharp as witch’s fingernails”<sup>103</sup> White housewives had the power and ability to impair an African-American family’s already scarce economic stability and well being, all the while “keeping their hands clean.”<sup>104</sup> Their capacity extended beyond subordinating their domestic help. It could affect other white women. Skeeter’s decision to write her novel awakens her to

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<sup>101</sup> Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters*, 137.

<sup>102</sup> Stockett, *The Help*, 188.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

the presence of racism in the home. While conducting her interviews with domestic maids on what it is like to work for a white woman, Skeeter realizes that for the first time she is seeing the true accounts of what it is to be African-American. She notes: "These things I know already, yet hearing them from colored mouths, it is as if I am hearing them for the first time."<sup>105</sup> In hearing the personal experiences of the domestics, Skeeter is able to step back away from the glorified white accounts of Jim Crow and grasp the reality of racism in Jackson. Her new discovery dissolves some of the previous ignorance she had and opens her eyes to the racism that her mother, social groups and closest friends possess and exert.<sup>106</sup>

The questioning of societal and racial norms posed different risks to African-American and white women. Resistance challenged the white women's image and posed a challenge to Southern heritage. Skeeter's growing awareness, agitation and resistance to the very racism she is now attuned to evokes a tension between herself and characters such as Hilly. Skeeter and Hilly's relationship disintegrates as they continue to encounter each other on the issue of racism. The tension between the two characters is emblematic of the issues of resistance and conformity during Civil Rights. Scholar John Lynxwiler states that the term "Southern woman" evokes the cultural image of a cult of womanhood domesticity that is "essentially white and relatively well to do."<sup>107</sup> This stereotype also functioned in creating a guide to behavior, mannerisms,

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid, 258.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid, 157.

<sup>107</sup> John Lynxwiler and Michelle Wilson, "The Code of the new Southern Belle: Generating Typifications to structure Social Interaction," in *Southern Women*, ed. Caroline Matheny Dillman (New York: Hemisphere Publishing Corporation, 1988): 113.

personality and image.<sup>108</sup> The cultural image of the Southern belle is represented as crucial and clung to by the Jackson housewives. Skeeter's growing resistance to the societal and racial norms of Jackson life and womanhood results in her being socially ostracized from the ladies of Jackson.

Distance begins to form between Skeeter and Hilly when Skeeter reads for the first time the Mississippi Jim Crow law code. The Jim Crow guide aided in Skeeter's awakening to the true ugliness of Hilly's home sanitation initiative.<sup>109</sup> Skeeter's reading of Jim Crow enlightens her to the fact that racism also exists well beyond the public sector. The only difference between these Jim Crow laws and ideas advocated by Hilly, is that Hilly's initiative lacks state legislation.<sup>110</sup> Hilly's discovery of the Jim Crow guide in Skeeter's bag and the scribbling over her imitative: "*Jim Crow or Hilly's bathroom plan – what's the difference?*"<sup>111</sup> signifies the beginning Skeeter's subordination. This was due to Hilly viewing Skeeter's behavior as defiant and threatening the image of her husband and herself.<sup>112</sup> Skeeter's social subjugation shows just how powerful the white women's "shiny set of tools"<sup>113</sup> really was.

One consequence of white women refusing to conform to the racial hierarchy in the South was being socially shunned. The social role of the Southern woman was a confining one.<sup>114</sup> Due to this, it was risky and difficult to break free from such an image and role. Skeeter's resistance to Hilly results in her being completely excluded and ostracized. This is apparent when Skeeter

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid, 114.

<sup>109</sup> Stockett, *The Help*, 173-174.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid, 174.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid, 188.

<sup>114</sup> Susan Middleton-Keirn, "Magnolias and Microships: Regional Subcultural Constructions of Femininity," in *Southern Women*, ed. Caroline Matheny Dillman (New York: Hemisphere Publishing Corporation, 1988), 141-42.

notes during a league meeting: “My exclusion is tangible, as if concrete walls formed around me.”<sup>115</sup> Skeeter’s loss of her role as secretary of the league and the friendship of many women, including her close friend Elizabeth, who became embarrassed to be seen with her, illustrates this ostracizing. Her exclusion conveys the consequence of defying the racial and social systems of a society such as Jackson.<sup>116</sup> Skeeter’s attempts to resist racial norms and defy the alpha of the Jackson housewives resulted in her being a complete outsider within the female society. While white men held primary responsibility for the segregation of the public sphere, women had their own personal duty to maintain racism within their own realm. They exerted their own form of agency. Those who no longer fitted within the narrow confines of the ideal Southern lady were bound for isolation. These women were forced to recognize their marginalized and lonely position in society as a result of defying the Southern culture. This was a way of life that complicit white women insisted had not and would not change.

## The Resistance of African-American Women and the Domestic Battle Front

The overt agency of the complicit white women was often met with resistance by African-American domestics. This resistance existed in a variety of forms. It was the domestic’s attempt to exert agency and mastery over a job that defined them as subjects and constantly subdued them.<sup>117</sup> Mildred from *Like One of the Family* boldly confronts her employers on the racism and discrimination

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<sup>115</sup> Stockett, *The Help*, 349.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid, 349-351.

<sup>117</sup> Bonnie Thornton Dill, *Across the Boundaries of Race and Class: An Exploration of Work and Family Among Black Female Domestic Servants*. (London: Garland, 1994), 83.

she faces. Working in the North, where racism was not as intense, Mildred is able to voice the injustices that many Southern domestics could not. After being patronized by her employer Mrs. C, Mildred hears her say to her guests: “We *just* love her! She’s *like* one of the family and she *just adores* our little Carol!”<sup>118</sup> Mrs. C. plays a role in feeding into the stereotype of the domestic worker being happy and well treated. Her patronizing manner and Childress’ choice of dialogue suggests Mrs. C. seeks to convince her guests on Mildred’s happiness and status in the white home.

Mildred confronts Mrs. C. to set the record straight on her true status in the white home. She states:

I wish you would please stop talkin’ about me like I was a *cocker spaniel* or a *poll parrot* or a *kitten* [...] In the first place, you do not *love* me [...] I am *not* like the family at all! The family eats in the dining room and I eat in the kitchen [...] Now when you say, ‘We don’t know *what* we’d do without her’ this is a polite lie because I know that if I dropped dead or had a stroke, you would get somebody to replace me. [...] I do not feel like no weekend house guest. I feel like a servant<sup>119</sup>.

Through Mildred, Childress exposes the falsity of the stereotypes and assumptions about the domestic; that she is happy, complacent and well treated in her job. Mildred’s response reveals Mrs. C.’s statement to be a fabrication. It exposes that Northerners also played a complicit role in race relations. By

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<sup>118</sup> Childress, *Like One of the Family: Conversations from a Domestic’s Life*, 1.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid*, 2-3.

depicting Mildred as happy and content, Mrs. C. both masked and glorified the reality of Mildred's status.

The irony of the domestic as a member of her white family reveals the reality and nature of her role. Mildred states she is far from being like one of the family and explodes over the very idea she is a family member.<sup>120</sup> Her confrontation of Mrs. C. debunks these mythologized ideas of the domestic. The text is situated in the North and Mildred's treatment in comparison to Moody's and Aibileen's seems mild. However, the collective experience of the domestic did not differ as a whole, as Mildred shows she still faces racism and is discriminated against. She symbolizes the life and substance of the domestic worker, being an individual rather than the "old faithful" family servant.<sup>121</sup> The refusal of Mildred to internalize and accept the stigma and injustices associated with the domestic offers a voice, or rather a collective consciousness, for African-American domestic workers. Through Mildred's upfront approach, the injustices faced by African-American workers are illuminated. She speaks for those domestics who had their voices silenced and their experience of inequality ignored.<sup>122</sup> Mildred challenges the traditional and stereotypical image of the domestic, and refuses to be defined by it.

In comparison to Mildred's direct approach, Anne Moody's, Aibileen and Minny's resistance is more discrete. Moody's autobiography and both versions of *The Help* are situated in the intimate suburbs of Centerville and Jackson in the Deep South of Mississippi. The racism was far more profound, stigmatized and concentrated. There was also a strong network of white women, whose

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<sup>120</sup> Trudier Harris, introduction to *Like One of the Family: Conversations from a Domestic's Life*, by Alice Childress (Boston, Beacon Press: 1986), xviii.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid*, xvii.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid*, xvii-xxix.

connections and communication with one another controlled the wellbeing of African-Americans. Anne Moody's challenge to her employer Mrs. Burke is more discrete and fear ridden than Mildred's. Moody's confrontation and resistance to the racism she faced in Burke's home is expressed firstly by perseverance and then abandonment. Moody articulated that working for Mrs. Burke was a struggle: "In a way, working for her was a challenge for me. She was the first one of her type I had run into."<sup>123</sup>, and that from the beginning of her employment, Burke had tried to both subdue and control her.<sup>124</sup> By working intimately with a white woman for the first time, the domestic experienced the core of racism and learned, as a rule of thumb, how she was able to oppose her newfound, but longstanding oppressor.

One mode of resistance to white women was persistence. On Moody's first day of work Burke forced her to enter the house from the back door and have her redo all the shirts she had ironed. Burke's justification was that the shirts were not ironed the way that Burke herself would have normally done them.<sup>125</sup> In response, Moody repelled Burke's attempts at subduing her through persisting to do jobs her own way.<sup>126</sup> Her silent resistance directly undermined Burke's authority. Moody's persistence to knock at the front door of Burke's house every morning showed she was not willing to be subdued and asserted her own autonomy that was limited in such an environment.<sup>127</sup>

Despite her resistance, Moody left working for Mrs. Burke over the summer. She claimed she was suffocating in the small racist town of Centerville

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<sup>123</sup> Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, 123.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid,122.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

and she: “couldn’t go on working for Mrs. Burke pretending I was dumb and innocent [...] I was sick of pretending, sick of selling my feelings for a dollar a day.”<sup>128</sup> Moody’s description of selling her feelings ties to the idea of the expectations required of the domestic. The ideal servant was one who was: “invisible and silent, responsive to demands but deaf to gossip” and indifferent at hearing of her supposed inferiority.<sup>129</sup> Moody’s fear to express her real feelings and hate for racism and discrimination resulted in her adopting a dual persona. Unlike Mildred, who openly challenges her employer and reveals her true feelings, Moody, in part, chose to conceal how she genuinely felt. Instead, she pretended to be comfortable and content in her role. It was Burke who awoke Moody to her inferior status and lack of agency in society. The only way she felt she could escape the racial stigma was to physically leave Centerville. As Moody’s education in the white home had taught her, any outright resistance from African-Americans in the Deep South posed a threat to their livelihood.

African-American women’s resistance in *The Help* was also expressed discreetly. This was once again due to the nature of racism in the Deep South. Skeeter approaches Aibileen, asking her if she wishes she could change things.<sup>130</sup> Despite Aibileen actually thinking the question was absurd: “And I can’t help myself. I look at her head-on. Cause that’s one a the stupidest questions I ever heard”,<sup>131</sup> she knows that the “worse thing you do for your career as a maid is have a smart mouth.”<sup>132</sup> After turning around “so she don’t see me rolling my

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid, 147.

<sup>129</sup> Katzman, *Seven Days a Week*, 188.

<sup>130</sup> Stockett, *The Help*, 10.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid, 17.

eyes”<sup>133</sup> Aibileen instead responds to Skeeter: “On no, ma’am, everything’s fine.”<sup>134</sup> Aibileen is hyperaware of her the power dynamics and racial hierarchy in home. Because of this she monitors her behavior and responses around Skeeter. Aibileen’s knowledge that her status in relation to white women and society means she is unable to freely express her true feelings regarding race relations. These feelings would be sure to shock the somewhat naïve Skeeter and enrage the sensibilities of the complicit white women.

One crucial moment in the both the film and text is when Minny seeks revenge on Hilly for damaging her future employment prospects. Minny is reputable for being one of the best cooks among the domestics.<sup>135</sup> She uses her reputation and the implicit and ironic trust placed by the white housewives in their domestics to her advantage. Knowing Hilly will eat anything she bakes, Minny bakes one of her famous chocolate pies.<sup>136</sup> However, the pie includes Minny’s own feces.<sup>137</sup> Most powerfully represented in the film, the scene captures the height of the domestic battlefield, with Minny and Hilly exerting their individual agency in a direct conflict.

Minny, the sassiest of the domestics, firstly wishes to only watch Hilly eat the pie, for her own personal satisfaction and safety. However, she becomes enraged by Hilly’s treatment of her, despite no longer working for her. Through gritted teeth, she says: “Eat my shit.”<sup>138</sup> Minny then, raising her eyebrows at the now aware Hilly, tilts her hat and departs the Holbrooke home.<sup>139</sup> While

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid, 33.

<sup>136</sup> Taylor, *The Help*.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

fictional, this intense scene allows insight into the severe, disturbing and contradictory trust and relationship between employer and domestic. Minny offers her revenge on Hilly to go in Skeeter's book as "*insurance*" as a way to safeguard the secrecy of the interviews.<sup>140</sup> Although risky, Minny depends upon and believes Hilly will never speak of their confrontation. She believes Hilly's priority is not to speak of how she came into contact with an African-American's feces, which according to her "disease preventative"<sup>141</sup> bill meant she was in danger of catching germs that only those with "darker pigmentation" were immune to.<sup>142</sup> Rather, Minny believes Hilly is more concerned with guarding her image and ironically having her "Home Help Sanitation Initiative" legislated.<sup>143</sup> This again shows the bizarre dynamic of trust at play. Minny exerts her limited agency based upon the domestic's relationship with white women. Paradoxically, she places trust in the trust that her antagonist and oppressor, in turn, has invested in her. The reciprocal and ironic trust highlights the paradoxical and contradictory relationship that the housewife and domestic shared.

Both the text and film are centered on African-American domestic maids revealing what it is truly like to work for the Jackson housewives. A trend in the two sources is the difficulty Skeeter faced in first convincing Aibileen and other maids to partake in an interview. In proposing her idea of the *Help* to Elizabeth Stein from the New York publishing corporation Harper & Row, Stein exclaims: "That's one hell of a risk to take in Jackson Mississippi."<sup>144</sup> Aibileen is also aware of the risk. She attempts to educate the naive Skeeter of the danger in confessing

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<sup>140</sup> Stockett, *The Help*, 367.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid*, 8.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid*, 158.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid*, 367.

<sup>144</sup> Taylor, *The Help* (2011).

the reality of working for a white woman. Aibileen explains to Skeeter: “there’s a reason” nobody has written a book like the *Help* and tells her: “You not knowing is what scare me the most. Scare me more than Jim Crow.”<sup>145</sup> The domestics have a strong awareness of the risk and danger of truth telling. By confessing what the domestic’s job entails, they expose all the discrimination, injustices and ironies within their roles.

In helping Skeeter reveal the true experience as a domestic in Jackson, the domestic maids were undermining the Southern culture and racial hierarchy. However, the interview was conducted secretly in the confines of Aibileen’s home.<sup>146</sup> The book the *Help* was also released anonymously with the names of the domestics and their employers changed.<sup>147</sup> They challenged the power and image of the white housewife, but in a way that did not directly incriminate them. This kept the domestics their jobs working under the same woman who they had ironically exposed. The release of the book has a “revolutionary” and scandalous effect in Jackson. It reveals all the ironies occurring in the home, provoking anger and shock from many complicit white women.<sup>148</sup> The idea that an African-American woman would defy a white woman, who is both her employer and direct oppressor, is radical. The critique and exposure of the racism in the white home shocked and angered the apparently neutral and delicate Southern belle. It awoke to her apparent oblivious, but extreme racism. By assertively entering the domestic battlefield, African-American woman ultimately disobeyed the racist Southern traditions and cultures most vividly exhibited in the home.

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> Stockett, *The Help*, 254.

<sup>148</sup> Taylor, *The Help* (2011).

## Conclusion

When exploring the private sphere, to simply call the white Southerner, and to an extent the Northerner, racist is inadequate. Scholar Adam Fairclough rightly argues that to call Southerners racist is being far too kind and generous: “The term ‘racist’ has become devalued through overuse: it fails to prepare one for the depths of disgust, contempt, and condescension with which whites, to varying degrees [...] regarded their black fellow citizens.”<sup>149</sup> While slavery had been abolished one hundred years prior, the white suburban home was a legacy to the plantation house. The home and the racial interactions within it continued to capture the very heart of racism and essence of slavery’s legacy. Southerners, who were cultivated by the dynamics of Jim Crow, clung onto their heritage and traditions: the strongest being slavery. While there could be no literal enslavement of African-Americans, there was a commitment to the racist mentality of the past.

The domestic’s role offers insight into a continuation of the master-slave relationship. They lacked opportunities and were confined to a relationship of domination. The domestic’s voice and experience of racism was silenced and ignored within history. Historian Bonnie Thornton Dill accounts for the importance of addressing and exploring the domestic’s daily struggles:

A very special aspect of domestic work is that it brings together, in a closed and intimate sphere of human interactions, people whose paths would never cross, were they to conduct their lives within the

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<sup>149</sup> Adam Fairclough, *Race & Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana, 1915-1972* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 14.

socioeconomic boundaries to which they were ascribed. These intimate interactions across the barriers of income, ethnicity, religion and race occur within a sphere of life that is private and has little public exposure – the family.<sup>150</sup>

Dill's statement highlights the importance of recognizing the insight gained from the home. The intimacy and interactions that the white home exposes was an element of racism that Jim Crow sought to conceal. The separation of the public and private spheres indicates that each realm possessed different dynamics and environments. As the traditional sources have failed to show, the home not only contributed towards racism, but rather possessed it's own potent form of it. Turning to literature as a way to see women in their gendered space, enables insight into the dynamics of Jane Crow. It exposes the complicit housewives' devotion to a power system that was knitted into the very foundations of their white suburban home.

By exploring the home as a tool of racial discrimination, a battlefield is exposed. This battlefield was not one performed in the backseat of a bus, or a Woolworth's lunch counter, nor is it found upon the 1965 Civil Rights Act. It was rather located in the overlooked space, or arena: known as the kitchen. The domestic battlefield has not gained wide historical recognition, but nonetheless, it remains crucial to explore the racial dynamics of the time. As *The Help*, *Coming of Age in Mississippi* and *Like one of the Family: Conversations from the life of a Domestic* reveal, on a daily basis, many African-American women entered a

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<sup>150</sup> Bonnie Thornton Dill, *Across the Boundaries of Race and Class: An Exploration of Work and Family Among Black Female Domestic Servants* (London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1994), 3.

domestic war zone. She was constantly rendered inferior and discriminated against by the same person who paradoxically relied upon and invested implicit trust in her: the complicit white housewife. While white and African-American women were integrating in the home, the nature of their encounter was one that both preserved and challenged America's long held racial hierarchy.

Complicit Southern, and to an extent, Northern white housewives hired maids to do tasks that were not impossible, but considered below their own status. The African-American domestic worker entered the white women's territory with the racial stigma and the myth of the mammy attached to her. It is only through the private sphere of the home that the horrific mentality that underlined the religion of segregation is exposed. Segregation was a system of dominance that controlled and consumed Southern culture. In the public sphere the power embedded in Jim Crow did not enable racial intimacy. It was away from the public eye where intimate racial encounters occurred. Jane Crow reveals the severe nature of racism, which Jim Crow sought to obscure. She functioned to enforce segregation and racism in a space that wholeheartedly reveals the mentality underlying racism to not be one about separation, but power. The domestic battlefield gave voice to the silenced racial antagonizing and daily battles of racism in America.

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