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Cooking and Eating the Other: Contemporary Representations of Domestic Workers in Popular Media

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**COOKING AND EATING THE OTHER: CONTEMPORARY REPRESENTATIONS OF
DOMESTIC WORKERS IN POPULAR MEDIA**

A Thesis

Presented to

The Academic Faculty

By

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In Partial Fulfillment

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Introduction

Cooking and Eating the Other

The mass media governs relations among social groups, manufactures political sentiment, and shapes opinions on economic relations between individuals to reproduce a self-perpetuating system of power for a minute elite. Over the course of the 20th century, this system has experienced substantial success in teaching American citizens what to look at and how to see, contributing to a system of social stratification that situates heteropatriarchal whiteness as the ideal mode of being in the world. This stratification is necessary for the reproduction of a social, political, and economic system that consistently privileges certain social groups over others and ensures power and privilege for a select few. The construction and organized distribution of manipulated cultural images that communicate embellished or patently false messages about a social group, determined by racial, gendered, or class lines, is central to the success of a capitalist economic system because it manufactures an opinion of who has access and who deserves access to power and resources in society.¹

Depictions of the home and home life have been central to contemporary popular culture. Lauren Berlant calls these spaces *intimate publics* that are advertised to a particular social group, promising to provide representations of their fantasies and interests.² The home and family is promoted as a space of femininity and femaleness, as it historically has been, and the products that present depictions of these identities are designed to mitigate feelings of dissatisfaction, marginalization, and insignificance that are the result of structural inequalities, but presented as

¹ K. Sue Jewell, *From Mammy to Miss American and Beyond: Cultural Images and the Shaping of US Social Policy*, (New York: Routledge, 1993), 7.

² Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008), 5.

personal or interpersonal problems that are solved through love, communication, and understanding of difference.

We are in the midst of a stalled revolution of the home.³ The women's liberation movement called for more equitable distribution of housework and childcare responsibilities as well as equal access to high-level employment; however, the rate at which mothers have entered the workforce has grossly surpassed the rate at which husbands and fathers share in domestic labor.⁴ In conjunction with this social change, neoliberal economic restructuring has resulted in middle-class families requiring two full-time incomes to maintain the same level of economic well being their parents enjoyed. Globally, these same austerity measures have contributed to a rise in female immigrants, predominantly from Central America, the Caribbean, and Southeast Asia, to labor in the booming service economy of late capitalism in the U.S. More women than ever are burdened with the "double-day" of housework and childcare that quickly causes burnout, exhaustion, and resentment. For those who are able to afford the expense, meager as it may be, the childcare and housework responsibilities are shifted to someone else—a housekeeper, a nanny, or a maid service.

The division of household labor among women today is defined by the perceived superiority of white womanhood and American nationality, and this notion is etched into cultural memory through media images. These displays are fixed in the minds of viewers as reflections of contemporary social relations while it is the image itself that creates the relation. Guy Debord's theory of the spectacle is useful in understanding this manifestation⁵. The spectacle refers to the complete domination of mass media in a late capitalist culture. The root of the spectacle is power

³ Arlie Hochschild. *The Second Shift*, (New York: Penguin, 1989), 269.

⁴ Hochschild, *The Second Shift*, appendix.

⁵ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, (Detroit: Black and Red 1983), 23.

and the spectacle itself is “the diplomatic representation of hierarchic society to itself.”⁶ Its representations do not reflect political, social, and cultural realities, but create these realities and consistently reproduce them with subtle variations. Popular film and television are arguably the greatest perpetrators of this ideology. In terms of this project, it is the representations of kind, loving, effortlessly maternal domestic workers that fix in the minds of the American⁷ public a reconstituted version of “mammy,” a dangerous image that subordinates a woman’s economic motivations for entering domestic work in favor of motivations guided by love. It is through these images that the public comes to know of the dark-skinned women that labor silently for next to nothing in their homes as housekeepers, nannies, and personal attendants for the elderly.

K. Sue Jewell explains, “Images of women in general have been developed for the purpose of retaining gender role definitions that are necessary to maintain the status quo, and therefore are unlikely to upset the existing balance of power and economic wealth.”⁸ To maintain the heteropatriarchal power structure that ensured the unmitigated flow of social and economic resources to the White, male, propertied elite, a “social hierarchy of discrimination” was developed and maintained through the transmission of familiar images through media.⁹ In this hierarchy of discrimination, women of color are fixed to occupy the lowest stratum.

Jewell provides an historical account of the images that are most associated with African-American womanhood in American culture and explains how these perpetually surfacing images bear responsibility for the consistent marginalization of women of color in U.S. society and the devaluation of their labor. These images are harmful and inaccurate on multiple levels. Not only do they encourage racist and sexist stereotypes, but these images also serve to justify the

⁶ Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 23.

⁷ Throughout this paper, references to “Americans” signify U.S. Americans.

⁸ Jewell, *From Mammy to Miss America and Beyond*, 58.

⁹ *Ibid.*

systemic barriers women of color struggle against politically and socially. The creation of characters that imagine Black women as being innately endowed with certain physical and personality traits is directly tied to the economic motivations of White slave owners in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The mammy and the jezebel, among other repeated images, emerged with the purpose of reifying specific cultural beliefs about black women's desires, capacity for knowledge, work ethic, and sexual motivations, in order to manage assumptions about what social power and resources they deserve. Jewell explains, "Social policy is designed to ensure the provision of goods and services to predetermined groups of individuals," and in this case, discriminatory social policy was created and then managed through cultural images that justified the elevated social status of the white family and the flow of surplus capital and goods to those same beneficiaries.¹⁰

Reconfigured versions of these same categories of femininity are still being utilized to ensure an inequitable distribution of resources among social groups. Despite being over a century old, these dangerous images are not anachronistic, as economic motivations of the ruling class in the U.S. have not changed much. Historically, it is the role of the African-American woman performing domestic duties, service work, or emotional support that is a favorite in mainstream film and television. However, in recent decades as immigration policy has become a controversial political issue, Latinas and other ethnic minorities who are read as being un-American have largely replaced the familiar image of the doting black mammy. These racialized images manufacture opinions of their worth as members of U.S. society. Grace Chang argues in *Disposable Domestic*s that the popularized image of the Latina immigrant coming to America to abuse social services and to have children for citizenship purposes is transmitted by the state in order to deny these women access to federal aid and other resources, when access to social

¹⁰ Jewell, *From Mammy to Miss America and Beyond*, 15.

services in the United States is actually among the worst in the developed world.¹¹ According to Margaret Villanueva, “racializing practices create images of the Latina, her family, her community, her cultural identity, and her spatial location that seem to explain and justify, while also constituting her subordinate position in U.S. society.”¹² Though the picture has changed, the hand that draws it has not.

Loving, nurturing, often sassy domestic workers are a favorite trope in American film and television. As a cultural derivative of the figure of the mammy, the newest representations of domestic workers in the media reflect the shifting demographic of the industry. Consumers of film and television are more likely to encounter feisty Latinas, like Rosario in *Will and Grace*, and young women “on their way up,” as in *The Nanny* and *Maid in Manhattan*. Mammy has so infected the social psyche of the American public that domestic workers are still not extended most federal labor protections that regulate working conditions and wages. The protections that have been granted to them are largely unknown to employers and the workers themselves. Ai-Jen Poo, director of the National Domestic Workers Association says that though policy is needed to protect workers, the fact that many of them are undocumented produces an additional hurdle for activists—a change in social and cultural attitudes towards immigrants and women of color must come first in order for protective public policy to have any positive effect on the industry. The belief that domestic work is a natural occupation for women is preserved by the privileged class to justify the social subordination and economic marginalization of women of color. Jewell explains: “It is believed that the subsistence wages received in these low-income generating occupations are acceptable and augmented by the intrinsic satisfaction by women in these

¹¹ Grace Chang, *Disposable Domestic: Immigrant Women Workers in the Global Economy*, (Cambridge: South End Press, 2000), 2.

¹² Margaret Villanueva, “Racialization and The Latina Experience: Economic Implications,” *Feminist Economics*, 8.2 (2002) 156.

positions, and that they are unable to perform well in other occupations.”¹³ She further explains that cultural images developed and perpetuated by the white, privileged and powerful class were a companion tool to the formal public policies that legally subordinated Black women to all other social groups to justify low pay and poor working conditions. This action continues today, as xenophobic state policies and austerity programs marginalize and demonize women of color as usurpers of federal funds.

This project seeks to reveal how the public perception of housework and the women who perform the labor—a perception conditioned by the media—thwarts efforts to obtain and enforce legislation that would protect both native and immigrant domestic workers. I will examine multiple and various cultural productions to explain how these images perpetuate inaccurate, and often harmful, stereotypes about women of color in U.S. society and the capabilities they have as laborers.

Part One, “The Socioeconomic and Political History of Domestic Service Work in the United States,” explores the history and evolution of domestic service in the United States, followed by an examination of the perception of domestic service and the capabilities of the women who perform the labor. I track important legislation and activism that has attempted, and sometimes succeeded, in elevating the status of the work and protecting the workers. Finally, I will discuss the power of images and why an examination of cultural productions is necessary in understanding why those who labor in American homes have consistently been barred from accessing most economic and social entitlements extended to other Americans.

Part Two, “Contemporary Representations of Domestic Workers in Popular Media,” tracks the representations of domestic workers in popular film and television shows that have emerged in the past twenty-five years and addresses the issue of misrepresentation of women of

¹³ Jewell, *From Mammy to Miss America and Beyond*, 22.

color and the value of their labor in the U.S. labor market. I will examine the 2011 film *The Help*, in conjunction with the novel of the same name, to reveal the way in which the agency of domestic workers is omitted in favor of a familiar collection of images featuring the white savior. The next section explores the 2013 film *August: Osage County* to explore the commentary surrounding perceptions of whiteness and American nationality. The final section analyzes the 1993 television show *The Nanny*, which emerged at a critical point in U.S. politics and contributed to the dialogue surrounding the rights of domestic workers.

I conclude with the 2013 television program *Devious Maids*, which features four ambitious Latinas working as maids in the homes of the rich and powerful Beverly Hills elite. The main character, Marisol Suarez, is a college professor posing as a maid to investigate the murder of Flora Hernandez, a fellow maid harboring a dark secret. Though the show maintains somewhat progressive images of Latina domestic workers, the revelatory potential of the show is lost in sentimentalism and eclipsed by humor and fantasy. Drawing on Lauren Berlant's concept of "intimate publics," I conclude that images consumed in mass media have power, dictate power, and are created by those who have power, in order to determine who gets access to what political, economic, and social benefits in the U.S. today.

Part One

The Socioeconomic and Political History of Domestic Service in the United States

Central to this study is the shift in household composition and management. In the pre-industrial Western world,¹⁴ only wealthy aristocrats hired servants, and the non-wealthy could be found performing specialized labor among a large staff of employed servants, both male and female.¹⁵ Industrialization in Europe shifted this model into one of a family managed by the housewife, who employs a “maid-of-all-work” to assist in her duties as housewife and mother. The industrial revolution in England is central to the changing relationship between the female head-of-house and the domestic. The industrial revolution contributed to a growing middle class that employed domestic workers to take over some of the duties typically performed by the wife to communicate their new wealth and elevated social status.¹⁶ Prior to this period, only the very wealthy could afford to employ a staff of domestic servants, as it was expected that the mistress of the house not to perform any manual labor.

When middle class families began to employ domestic workers the nature of the work changed. Unable to afford a staff of specialized domestic service workers, middle class women employed “maids-of-all work” to perform multiple household tasks, which were usually the most undesirable jobs. These positions were quickly filled with young people leaving rural farms for larger cities, seeking higher wages and new opportunities.

¹⁴ Industrialization began in Europe in the late 18th century, marking the shift from a largely agrarian economy to one of manufacturing goods. According to Rollins domestic service in the United States draws its inspiration from feudal and industrializing Western Europe. See Judith Rollins, *Between Women Domestic and Their Employers*, (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1985), 24.

¹⁵ Rollins, *Between Women: Domestic and Their Employers*, 24-25.

¹⁶ Rollins, *Between Women*, 31.

Industrialization and the subsequent growing middle-class became large contributing factors to the “feminization” of domestic service.¹⁷ Wives became responsible for the hiring and managing of domestic workers and the labels of “master-servant” became less frequently used. Instead “help” was hired to assist the housewife with her housekeeping and caregiving duties. As workers, women in particular were funneled into this field, as it was considered a more “respectable” form of employment for women and other employment opportunities were limited. Domestic employment provided young women an opportunity to train for marriage and their own roles as future housewives, allowed them to save money, and allegedly afforded them more protection if they lived in.¹⁸ Today, domestic work is still thought of as a “bridging” occupation, especially for recent immigrants.¹⁹

The new employers of domestics were not wealthy aristocrats, but middle-class families that earned only marginally more than their employees. Thus, standards for service and proper methods for managing domestic employees began to appear in the form of magazines, columns and domestic service courses, in order to produce the class distinction that would subordinate the female domestic worker to the female head-of-house. The use of livery became standard and other criteria for obsequiousness became commonplace for domestic workers. Maternalism, the act of subordinating a perceived inferior as if she were a child, was employed to establish a hierarchy of difference in the household. Rollins explains: “This need for greater deference, for clearer class distinctions on the part of the middle class, undoubtedly grew out of their insecurity and upward strivings.”²⁰ She says further: “All females share a secondary gender position in the society. The female employer of a domestic has a lower social and familial status than her male

¹⁷ Rollins, *Between Women*, 33-34.

¹⁸ Rollins, *Between Women*, 37.

¹⁹ Mary Romero, *Maid in the U.S.A.*, (New York: Routledge, 2002),6.

²⁰ Rollins, *Between Women*, 35.

counterpart,” and the body of the domestic became the site for her to validate her superiority as middle class.²¹ This new standard for interaction explains how industrialization profoundly changed the way in which women interacted with the domestic workers whom they employed and informs the evolution of domestic service work in the United States, as well as contemporary experiences of workers in the domestic service industry today.²²

Domestic Work in the United States

In the United States, the ethnic and racial makeup of the domestic service demographic is relative to region and period. Judith Rollins explains that domestic service in the United States can be considered in four distinct phases.²³ I declare an emerging fifth stage that relies on the citizen/immigrant distinction, a result of the feminization of migration and global neoliberal restructuring. According to Rollins, the colonial period²⁴ in the U.S. is the first distinct phase and established a “contradiction between principles and behavior” that continue to haunt domestic work. She explains that the earliest settlers brought with them liberal and democratic ideologies that were not reflected in the manner in which servants were treated. The first wave of domestic workers in the U.S. were convicts from England, indentured white servants, “free willers,” blacks, and Native Americans. Convicts and indentured servants could be found everywhere, while “free willers” were only found in Maryland and distinguished from the other subordinated classes of workers by their Christianity.²⁵ Native Americans were forced into servitude in New England and black servants were found in the Southern colonies. Rollins comments on the lack

²¹ Rollins, *Between Women*, 180

²² Rollins, *Between Women*, 31.

²³ Rollins, *Between Women*, 48.

²⁴ From colonization of the North American continent until approximately the year 1776.

²⁵ Rollins, *Between Women*, 49.

of distinction between the term “servant” and “slave” during this period. For Rollins, the liberal ideologies brought with colonists to the new American continent were not extended to servants, who were considered unable to exercise rational thought and free will because of their membership in a “biologically inferior” social group. Treatment of household servants was very poor, including frequent physical abuse, poor housing, unlimited working hours, and lack of access to adequate food.²⁶

The second period of distinction lasts from American independence to the mid-nineteenth century. After the revolutionary war, northern states began to employ wage-laborers of the same ethnic and religious communities to which they belonged to perform domestic service. More affected by the liberal philosophy of the revolutionary period, this arrangement between domestic employee and employer remains the most egalitarian in United States’ history, and the term “help” was used frequently in order to promote an idea of equality between employer and employee.²⁷ The hiring of “help,” typically a younger woman, was most common during times in which the housewife needed additional assistance for her own duties, such as harvest season, illness, or following childbirth.²⁸

During this same period, Southern states began to replace all domestic workers with African slaves. Phyllis Palmer explains, “slave labor made possible an aristocratic ideal of personal service” that remained intact after emancipation and became an indicator for middle-class status.²⁹ Native-born whites across the country learned from the “Southern model” after the Civil War and adopted the belief that it was the role of the wife to supervise the service of those, who were dark-skinned, foreign, or otherwise different from white, native-born, Christians. Later

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Rollins, *Between Women*, 50; Romero, *Maid in the U.S.A.*, 81

²⁸ Romero, *Maid in the U.S.A.*, 81.

²⁹ Phyllis M. Palmer, *Domesticity and Dirt: Housewives and Domestic Servants in the United States, 1920-1945*, (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1989), 6.

in the nineteenth century, as more European immigrants began to arrive in the United States, native-born workers in the north were largely replaced by Irish and German immigrants. The *ethos* of equality that existed following the American Revolution quickly disappeared in this region. Housewives under the spell of the cult of domesticity began to whine of the “servant problem” in magazines and other media.³⁰

The third period extends from the mid-nineteenth century, after the Civil War, until World War I. Emancipation brought little relief to African-American women in the South. Triply oppressed by their race, class, and gender, black women were socially and politically limited in employment options outside of domestic work.³¹ While black women held the majority in the industry in the South, the northern states experienced a demographic shift in response to increased immigration. By the late nineteenth century, European immigrants replaced native-born whites in domestic service positions, and employers adopted new beliefs and instituted new tactics to distinguish themselves from the women working in their homes.

“The Cult of Domesticity” is used to describe the mid-nineteenth century philosophy that reorganized the middle-class life around consumption, for which the wife and mother was responsible.³² Emerging from increasing numbers of affordable modern appliances and conveniences, the housewife’s role shifted from one of pure production to one of spiritual guidance and moral uplift in the home. Middle-class and upper-class women were encouraged to buy more products and appliances to fulfill their families’ needs and to hire younger, uneducated women to supervise and train in the art of housewifery, under the presumption that her occupation was temporary and she would soon move into the ranks of housewife herself. This practice conveniently ignored the racial and class differences that demanded a lifetime of

³⁰ Rollins, *Between Women*, 50.

³¹ Rollins, *Between Women*, 51.

³² Romero, *Maid in the U.S.A.*, 84.

“double-days” for poor women and women of color in and out of their own homes that would become theorized a century later by black feminists.

The term ‘servant’ was reintroduced during this period in order to further distinguish the lofty role of housewife from the subordinated position of servant. Driven by burgeoning industrial capitalist ideologies, this period marks the shift from the housewife acting as mistress of the house to the housewife acting as manager of the home. Debord explains: “The economy transforms the world, but transforms it only into a world of economy,” and the relationship between housewife and servant was soon dictated by free market principles.³³ The housewife became the administrator of the home and began to reorganize the work of the domestic to fit this model. Romero explains: “Domestics were reduced to unskilled labor and subjected to constant supervision. As in the factory, the scientific management model served to increase the level of drudgery in household work [...] just as managers disregarded workers skill and judgment in the factory, mistresses rejected the skill of domestics in their attempts to gain control over them.”³⁴

Domestics were not treated as people separate in identity from their employment. Housewives delegated the most physically difficult tasks to their maid, and housewives as employers expected almost unlimited working hours with no clear boundaries for time on and time off.³⁵ The 24-hour work cycle expected of the domestic is based upon the housewife’s perception that her own work as wife and mother is never over, further contributing to the association of domestic work as non-work.³⁶ The woman who employs a domestic employee does so in order to maintain an image of “daintiness and perfection” that was considered the

³³ Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* 40.

³⁴ Romero, *Maid in the U.S.A.*, 87.

³⁵ Palmer, *Domesticity and Dirt*, 73.

³⁶ Palmer, *Domesticity and Dirt*, 74.

ideal for the middle-class wife and mother.³⁷ The housewife acted as manager of the family and had to maintain the image of effortless and beauty that bourgeois femininity required. The incessant, dirty, care work associated with caring for young children and cleaning the house interfered with the fulfillment of that role and was delegated to the maid, justified by her racial or ethnic difference and perceived inferiority. Premilla Nadasen explains that, “employers constructed their domestic workers as racially different, rendering them invisible and justifying low pay and poor working conditions.”³⁸ The domestic worker was subordinated in the hierarchy of the household due to her proximity to the dirt of others that she made disappear.

The period after World War I marks the beginning of the fourth phase of domestic service. The war created new occupation opportunities for both men and women, many in factories and offices. Those who were able to enter a new field did so. However, these individuals were typically white. Irish and German immigrants, for example, used domestic work as a “stepping stone” position into other forms of employment; however, black women were largely unable to obtain employment in other occupations due to endemic racism and structural barriers.

Patricia Hill Collins explains that the exploitation of black women’s labor is essential to a successful capitalist economic system.³⁹ There has been no period in United States history in which the labor of women of color was not exploited for the economic gain of white Americans. From 1890 to 1960 domestic service was the principle occupation for employed African-American women.⁴⁰ This period is inclusive of “the great migration” of black Americans from Southern towns to Northern cities. African-American men, largely sharecroppers from

³⁷ Palmer, *Domesticity and Dirt*, 138.

³⁸ Nadasen, Premilla. "Citizenship Rights, Domestic Work, and the Fair Labor Standards Act." *The Journal of Policy History*, no.1 (2012), 211.

³⁹ Patricia Hill Collins. *Black Feminist Thought*. (New York and London: Routledge, 2000), 6.

⁴⁰ Elizabeth Beck, "The National Domestic Workers Union and the War on Poverty." *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare*. no. 4, (2001) 160.

Emancipation until the early twentieth century, moved to work in cities in meatpacking factories and other manufacturing industries, and their wives moved with them.⁴¹ The exodus of European immigrant women into factories created an increased demand for cheap domestic workers, and African-American women leaving the South filled this gap. In the Southern states, the high ratio of servants to those looking to employ them kept the majority of black women in domestic service, even after Emancipation.

During this period, African-American domestic workers were likely to be older and married. Seeking to retain more personal time and distance from the families they worked for, workers transitioned the vast majority of household labor from live-in employment to a career of “day-work,” that is domestic workers who live out and commute to their employers each day. The transition to day-work is evident of the career African-American women made from domestic labor, rather than a “stepping stone” occupation for young, rural, or recently immigrated women looking for work and lodging. Day-work was a better option for women working as domestics with families of their own and allowed more autonomy and control over their hours and working conditions. If a situation was bad, for example, it was much easier to leave when one did not have to consider new living arrangements. However, there is strong evidence that live-out work is the result of racial discrimination. In the Jim Crow south, many employers did not want to live in the same neighborhood as their servants and certainly not under the same roof.⁴² This shift marked the “ghettoization” of domestic labor in the United States, in which the occupation itself became so indelibly marked with racial and ethnic subordination that its workers are likely to never leave the occupation and their daughters are more likely to enter the workforce, as well.

⁴¹ Katherine S. Van Wormer, David W. Jackson, and Charletta Sudduth. *The Maid Narratives: Black Domesticity and White Families in the Jim Crow South*, LSU Press, 2012, 54.

⁴² Rollins, *Between Women*, 54.

Throughout the 1960's and 1970's, the demographic makeup of the industry changed, ushering in what I stress marks the fifth stage of domestic work in the United States. After the passage of The Civil Rights Act of 1964, black American women sought employment in more professional industries. The 1970 census marks the first year that domestic work was not the primary occupation for employed African-American women.⁴³ The exodus of black women from domestic work, resulting from formal policy change, is reminiscent of the exodus of European immigrants from the industry at the turn of the century. A pattern can be detected from these shifts that reveals a constant movement to cheaper labor when it comes to hiring household help.

Since the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the impact of the women's liberation movement, more women have entered the workforce to fill the demand for skilled or technical jobs. Despite the shifting gender dynamics in the workforce, labor dynamics in the household have not changed. Women are still responsible for care work that includes cooking, cleaning, and rearing of children. Women of the global north are now expected to be able to do it all, and when they cannot, they look for cheap help.⁴⁴

The Hart Cellar Act of 1965 increased the number of female immigrants from Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean. Throughout the remaining three decades and into our current century, immigrant women have occupied the majority position in the demographic makeup of the domestic service industry.

These legal shifts in the United States, global free trade policies, and structural adjustment programs have led to the extraction of third-world labor to first-world countries to fill the positions in the low-waged service economy that global capitalism demands.⁴⁵ The result is

⁴³ Nadasen, "Citizenship Rights, Domestic Work and the Fair Labor Standards Act," 86.

⁴⁴ Saskia Sassen, "Global Cities and Survival Circuits," in *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers*, 238.

⁴⁵ Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Hochschild, "Introduction," *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers*, (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2002), 2-3.

third world immigrants doing the “women’s work” left by first world women in the domestic sphere.

Globally, structural adjustment programs (SAP’s) and free trade agreements have exacerbated the rate at which women are becoming impoverished and exploited for cheap labor as the result of economic austerity measures. This process has led to increased rates of female migration from the global south to the global north for work, when their own livelihoods are sold out to the interests of global capitalism. As Grace Chang notes, “SAP’s are founded on the tacit assumption that poor women of color can make do with less and work more.”⁴⁶ But, contrary to popular political rhetoric, women are not crossing borders to have babies and end up on welfare in order to avoid working. Women of the global south travel to the U.S. to work as nannies, housekeepers and caregivers, among other low-wage occupations, so that affluent women can maintain their professional employment and further increase the wealth of first world nations. Terri Nilliasca agrees, arguing “the global commodification of labor reproduction is a product of continuous colonization and economic warfare that reinforces the wealth of first-world nations and the subjugation of third-world nations.”⁴⁷ Women are both “pushed and pulled” to find jobs available here when those in their home nations run dry.⁴⁸ While those available in the U.S. are typically low-paying, hazardous, service sector jobs, a substantial number are positions in private households as housekeepers, nannies, and personal attendants, which are also low paying and dangerous to one’s health.

The majority of domestic workers in the U.S. today are immigrants, largely from Mexico, Central and South America, the Caribbean, and South-Asian Pacific nations. In addition to the

⁴⁶ Chang, *Disposable Domesticity*, 125.

⁴⁷ Terri Nilliasca “Some Women’s Work: Domestic Work, Class, Race, Heteropatriarchy, and the Limits of Legal Reform,” *Michigan Journal of Race and Law*, (Spring 2011), 6.

⁴⁸ Ehrenreich and Hochschild, “Introduction,” 3.

lack of federal labor laws protecting women working as domestic employees, immigrants are doubly excluded social citizenship rights based on nationality and immigration status. Thus, women are extracted from their home countries that have been impoverished by first world imperialism, and planted in middle and upper class Western homes to fill the void for the reproduction of cheap household labor.

Public Policy and Domestic Work

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the United States Supreme Court regularly struck down state laws that established maximum hours for workers, citing infringement upon individual freedom to make a contract. The exception to this policy was the regulation of women workers' hours. Both state and federal governments believed that a woman's right to make a contract was superseded by her duty to procreation and the care work associated with family life. Ironically, the regulation of maximum hours that applied to women working in industrial settings did not apply to domestic workers. During this period, the majority of women employed as domestic workers were black women, who generally worked the longest days for little pay.⁴⁹ A gendered and racialized logic contributes to the denial of domestic work as respectable employment that qualifies for federal regulation. For many reasons, domestic work is not considered "real" work.

The work that takes place within the home—cleaning, cooking, caring for children, the elderly or the sick—is associated with the natural activities of women and not deserving of a wage because it believed she would have performed the tasks out of love anyway.⁵⁰ Housework

⁴⁹ Evelyn Nakano Glenn, *Forced to Care: Coercion and Caregiving*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010). 133-134.

⁵⁰ Pierrette Hongdagne-Sotelo, *Doméstica: Immigrant Workers Cleaning and Caring in the Shadows of Affluence*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), 9.

is conflated with the social roles of wife and mother. The work itself is not understood as labor, but as an extension of family responsibility, a “labor of love.”⁵¹ Women who labor in the homes of others are not thought of as performing a job, but rather as fulfilling the duties that are considered natural to women. However, the ability to perform these labors is not considered natural to *all women*, but rather women of color and recent immigrants “thought to embody the traditional feminine qualities of nurturance, docility and eagerness to please.”⁵² These beliefs derive from the exploitation of black women’s labor as caregivers for white families throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century and the controlling images of black women performing these tasks with pleasure and devotion. Patricia Hill Collins explains: “Mammy is the public face that Whites expect Black women to assume for them.”⁵³

Women of color are still racially cast into the role of the obsequious caregiver. Parents of children cared for by nannies seek immigrant and native born women of color because they hope to import and impart that particular culture to their child due to its “warm family ties, strong community life, and long tradition of patient maternal love for children,” ignoring the obvious irony that these naturally “maternal” women have left children of their own to make enough money to send remittances home for their care.⁵⁴ Women hire other women to work in their homes on the basis of personality characteristics, rather than skill. Mary Romero says that white women hired black women to work in their homes based on the stereotype that African-American women possess inordinate spiritual strength, a common perception of the mammy as cultural icon.⁵⁵ This perception continues to haunt workers in the field, requiring from them emotional, as well as physical labor.

⁵¹ Romero, *Maid in the U.S.A.*, 51.

⁵² Ehrenreich and Hochschild, “Introduction,” 9.

⁵³ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 81.

⁵⁴ Arlie Hochschild, “Love and Gold,” in *Global Woman*, 23.

⁵⁵ Romero, *Maid in the U.S.A.*, 141.

White women's status is conditioned by a racialized and class based hierarchy; thus the division of household labor among women is defined by the perceived superiority of white womanhood.⁵⁶ Women who employ domestic workers are not just subcontracting their own household labor to an equal; in addition, they are incorporating into their home a visible marker of their elevated social status. The practice of deference, gift giving, and the expectation of emotional labor on behalf of the domestic worker make up the "daily rituals and practices" that structure the power of the relationship.⁵⁷ These imbedded social paradigms regarding gender, race and nationality continue to plague domestic workers, preventing any substantive legislation that would elevate their status as laborers. Historically, white women have played a role in preventing domestic workers from achieving federal labor protections, including a regulated minimum wage, for fear of losing the source of cheap, highly exploitable labor required to maintain harmony in their homes.⁵⁸

Until the 1930's, labor regulations were under the guidance of state leadership. The election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt initiated the legislation that would set federal labor standards. The Fair Labor and Standards Act, passed in 1937, fixed a federal minimum wage and established maximum weekly hours. This and other New Deal programs extended social citizenship to many—but not all. "The white male industrial employee because the prototypical worker and that model informed assumptions about what constituted legitimate work," Nadasen explains.⁵⁹ Conservatives and Southern Democrats targeted domestic work, the predominant industry for black women, to be excluded from federal work related benefits.⁶⁰ White women joined ranks with their husbands and other male leaders to prevent laws to regulate hours and

⁵⁶ Palmer, *Domesticity and Dirt*, 6; Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 80.

⁵⁷ Romero, *Maid in the U.S.A.*, 145.

⁵⁸ Niliasca, "Some Women's Work," 395.

⁵⁹ Nadsen, "Citizenship Rights, Domestic Work and the Fair Labor Standards Act," 76.

⁶⁰ Dorothy Sue Cobble, *The Other Women's Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 96.

wages for domestic workers, explaining that such legislation would intrude upon their private rights to manage what happens in their own homes.⁶¹ The public/private debate is central to the struggle of domestic workers seeking federal labor protections equal to that of the majority of American workers. American liberalism shields the family and home-life from state regulation. Employers are reluctant to understand their dwellings as workplaces and often lobby against efforts to regulate the labor of domestic workers. The Minnesota State Supreme Court codified this sentiment into law in 1937 in *State v. Cooper*, ruling that the home was a “sacred” place, after a dismissed domestic worker protested on the front lawn of his employer’s home.⁶²

Despite these challenges, activists have struggled for decades to increase the labor protections and benefits extended to domestic workers. The civil rights movement and women’s liberation movements emboldened activists working on behalf of domestic workers and the workers themselves.

In the late 1960’s, domestic workers began organizing local worker centers. Dorothy Bolden organized the National Domestic Workers Union (NDWU), which was neither national nor a union, in Atlanta in 1968. Bolden worked as a domestic employee in Atlanta her entire adult life and was inspired to organize domestics after working with the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). NDWU and Bolden sought to change the perception of domestic workers in order to elevate their social status and increase their wages. Instead of strikes and sit-ins, NDWU arranged for household management classes and other sessions designed to professionalize the industry and give each member the confidence to stand up for their rights and know when they are being abused, as many were unaware of the laws designed to

⁶¹ Niliasca, “Some Women’s Work,” 395.

⁶² Niliasca, “Some Women’s Work” 2.

protect them.⁶³ Due to the fact that each member had a different employer and worked in a private home, building the base of the movement had to take place in public places. Bus stops and public parks were key in educating workers on their rights and initiating them into the non-union union. Bolden's goal was not to liberate women from domestic work, but to "teach each maid how to negotiate."⁶⁴ Organizations like NDWU appeared in over two-dozen cities across the country throughout the late 1960's. NDWU provided training, professionalization, advocacy and service to its members.

The grassroots organizing of Bolden and the NDWU in Atlanta were important in highlighting the racialized, gendered and class based oppression of domestic workers. But, large-scale mobilization was needed to change the law and mandate a federal minimum wage for domestic workers. Coinciding with the local activity, the National Committee of Household Employees (NCHE) was reorganized in 1965 with the support of the Women's Bureau. The initial executive board of NCHE included labor feminists Dorothy Height, Esther Peterson, and Freida Miller. Initially, NCHE focused on training and education programs for household employees. After securing a series of Ford Foundation Grants, NCHE developed experimental businesses and cooperatives that were minority run and owned, published handbooks for household workers, and made further attempts to professionalize the field. The goal was to give domestic work a "business-like edge," evident in the terminological change from simply "help," "housekeeper," or "maid" to titles such as "household technicians," "child care provider," and "home manager." The efforts of NCHE during this period did not result in any self-sustaining businesses, but they were successful training and educational programs.⁶⁵

⁶³ Elizabeth Beck, "The National Domestic Workers Union and the War on Poverty," *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare* no. 4. (2001), 202-206.

⁶⁴ Premilla Nadasen, "Power, Intimacy and Contestation: Dorothy Bolden and Domestic Worker Organizing in Atlanta in the 1960's," in *Intimate Labors: Culture, Technologies, and Politics in Care Work*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 208.

⁶⁵ Eileen Boris, and Premilla Nadasen. "Domestic Workers Organize!" *Working USA* 11, no. 4 (2008), 421.

Edith Barksdale-Sloan became the new leader of NCHE in 1969. Sloan had legal training, a background in domestic work, and a desire to bring a black feminist and a class-conscious perspective to the largely white, middle-class board of directors. Sloan reorganized the priorities of NCHE and initiated the national movement of household technicians. She sought to transform the committee from one that made better domestic workers to one that made work better for domestics. Her goal was to raise the wages of domestic workers and provide them with the benefits of social citizenship without stigma. In 1971, NCHE held a three-day convention attended by delegates from local domestic workers affiliates from thirty-five states for the purpose of electing members to the first board of NCHE's newly developed Household Technicians of America (HTA). This association was established in order to bring together local domestic worker organizations to collectively push for legislation that would increase wages for household employees, enforce federal labor laws, and provide benefits like paid sick leave and vacation time.⁶⁶ This event was the large-scale, high profile movement that domestic workers needed to mobilize effective legislative campaigns. Workshops and training sessions were available to help individuals learn successful community organizing techniques. In the three years following the 1971 convention, HTA formed alliances with feminist organizations and civil rights organizations in order to lobby for minimum wage benefits to be extended to domestic workers. In 1974, domestic workers won inclusion into the Fair Labor Standards Act that set a federal minimum wage for workers. The following year, the U.S. Department of Labor removed care work from the list of included domestic workers. It was determined that individuals who provided "companionship services" for persons who were unable to care for

⁶⁶ Boris and Nadasen, "Domestic Workers Organize!," 422-423

themselves in a residence were not to be covered by federal minimum wage and maximum hours protections.⁶⁷ This retrogression aligned care workers with babysitters and nothing more.

The National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA) formed in 2007 in order to fight for legislative action that would elevate the social status of domestic work through an increased minimum wage, the extension of worker's safety rights to home care work and related domestic services, and the protection of other benefits, like paid sick days and overtime pay. NDWA is currently fighting for respect, recognition and dignity for women who work in domestic homes at the state level. At this point, they have ratified a Domestic Workers Bill of Rights in five states. Oregon was the most recent victory in June of 2015, following New York, Hawaii, Massachusetts, and California.⁶⁸

Today, home care work is one of the fastest growing occupations in the United States, but workers average 30 percent less earnings than other female-dominated occupations.⁶⁹ Both of these facts point to the urgency for labor reform legislation on the national level. However, over two-thirds of America's home careworkers are foreign born and undocumented; thus, any substantive labor reform also requires lawmakers to consider the issue of immigration seriously first.

Ai-Jen Poo, director of the National Domestic Worker's Alliance, argues that immigration reform needs to be a primary concern for activists looking to elevate the status and working conditions for domestics.⁷⁰ She reports that a 2012 study found that 85 percent of home careworkers did not report abuse suffered at the hands of their employers due to the threat of

⁶⁷ Eileen Boris and Jennifer Klein, "Making Home Care: Law and Social Policy in the US Welfare State," in *Intimate Labors: Cultures, Technologies, and Politics of Care Work*, 187.

⁶⁸ Brandon Southward, "Oregon becomes fifth state to pass domestic workers bill of rights," *Statesman Journal*, June 18, 2015, accessed July 3, 2015, <http://www.statesmanjournal.com/story/news/2015/06/19/oregon-becomes-fifth-state-pass-domestic-worker-bill-rights/28961597/>

⁶⁹ Kristin Smith and Reagan Baughman. "Caring for America's aging population: a profile of the direct-care workforce." *Monthly Lab. Rev.* 130 (2007): 20.

⁷⁰ Lydia Depillis, "How to Pay the Help," *Washington Post*.

deportation. While contracts that mandate standard working conditions seem to be the ultimate goal, mandating reporting from employers would only push undocumented workers into another unregulated, hazardous, and low-paying position. Educating employers of domestics about their responsibilities is critical. A change in perception is a crucial first step.

Film and television have something to tell us about domestic work and domestic workers, and what they have had to say so far has not been good. Popular images of maids and nannies communicate harmful stereotypes about the women, usually women of color, who perform this labor. Media producers must accept the responsibility of creating and showing more progressive images of women of color in order to alter public perception of their worth as citizens of the state.⁷¹ The remaining sections will explore contemporary representation of domestic workers in popular media to address the issue of misrepresentation of women of color and the value of their labor in the current U.S. labor market.

⁷¹ bell hooks, *Real to Reel: Race Class and Sex at the Movies*, (New York: Routledge, 1996), 124.

Part Two: Contemporary Representations of Domestic Workers in Popular Media

The second part of this thesis explores how socioeconomic and political conditions are manifested in cultural products to reproduce an exploitative economic system that devalues female labor in domestic service positions. Popular film and television are precise tools for measuring cultural attitudes and those that follow provide explanations for the marginalization of domestic workers in current U.S. society.

I will examine the 2011 film *The Help*, in conjunction with the novel of the same name, to reveal the way in which the agency of domestic workers fighting for civil rights is disregarded and transformed into a familiar collection of images that reinforce racist and damaging stereotypes of African American women and promote a version of meritocracy that is born out of white supremacy to assuage the guilt of white audiences who benefit from the exploited work of women of color.

The 2013 film *August: Osage County* similarly perpetuates retrogressive ideas regarding the emotional labor expected of domestic workers. Johnna is the live-in caregiver to an aging, drug-addicted racist, who acts as the spiritual compass and the unexpected savior of the film. *August: Osage County* comments on how perceived American nationality, based off of perceptions of whiteness, works to qualify one for social and political parity.

Television similarly provides the public with distorted depictions of the lives of domestic workers. The sitcom *The Nanny*, starring Fran Drescher, emerged at a critical point in the 1990's, just as the controversy surrounding Zoe Baird and her undocumented, live-in nanny, Lillian Cordero, started a national conversation on regarding the undocumented status of domestic workers. However, the question was how much effort to document the employment of their

maids is “fair” for employers, a sentiment that echoes the protestations of white women employers of domestics during the New Deal era.

I conclude this thesis by examining the 2013 television program *Devious Maids*, which features four ambitious Latinas working as maids in the homes of the rich and powerful Beverly Hills elite. Though the show maintains somewhat progressive images of Latina domestic workers, the revelatory potential of the show is lost in sentimentalism and eclipsed by humor and fantasy. Drawing on Lauren Berlant’s concept of “intimate publics,” I conclude that images consumed in mass media have power, dictate power, and are created by those who have power, in order to determine who gets access to what political, economic, and social benefits in the U.S. today.

Polish and Privilege: White Womanhood and *The Help*

The film version of Kathryn Stockett’s novel *The Help* stars Viola Davis and Emma Stone as Aibileen Clark and Skeeter Phelan, the anonymous authors of a collection of maid narratives in 1960’s Mississippi. Stockett’s characters in the novel are inquisitive, frank, and radical for their era. Unfortunately however, these traits fail to translate to the big screen. The film version, written and directed by Tate Taylor, is an example of what Toni Morrison terms the ‘dehistoricized allegory,’ a narrative that fails to accurately accommodate the political and social realities of the historical period in a literary product in order to legitimize power relations.⁷² Taylor’s version also fails to accommodate many of the more progressive or radical details of the novel, privileging Skeeter’s (Stone) triumph and transcendence, through hard work and a strong sense of morality, over Aibileen’s defiance (Davis).

⁷² Toni Morrison. *Playing In The Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1992),68.

Morrison argues that the American literary tradition relies on American Africanism to construct alternative histories that attend to the “connotative and denotative blackness that African peoples have come to signify.”⁷³ These definitions of blackness are necessary for the construction of whiteness in the literary imagination, and they manage the national conversation regarding race and access to power. While another project could argue that the novel is more progressive in its representations of black women, the film follows the tradition of “silence and evasion,” in regards to race, that dominates literary discourse.⁷⁴ This section will reveal the way in which Aibileen’s resistance and radicalism is eclipsed by Skeeter’s in the film version, resulting in an ending that fails to capture the resistance and revolution taking place in the South during these years.

In the film version of *The Help*, Skeeter Phelan is home from college to Jackson—a small town in Mississippi clinging to an ethos of antebellum aristocracy. She aspires to be a writer and finds employment answering letters for an advice column in the local newspaper. As the daughter of a wealthy farmer, Skeeter has no experience with housekeeping. In the novel, the Phelans are cotton farmers. This detail was likely omitted from the film in an attempt to suppress the association of domestic work and slavery. In *Domesticity and Dirt*, Phyllis Palmer says the occupation was “metaphorically and structurally” linked to slavery in three ways: first being, domestics were not treated as people separate in identity from their employment; second, housewives delegated the most physically difficult tasks to the domestic; and third, housewives as employers expected almost unlimited working hours with no clear boundaries for time on and off. Skeeter turns to Aibileen for help writing the column because her family’s own maid, Constantine, recently left. Constantine’s character embodies the traditional Mammy figure of the

⁷³ Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 6.

⁷⁴ Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 9.

American literary imagination. Throughout the film, she is revealed as doting, caring and totally committed to the white family she serves.⁷⁵ For example, in an early scene, a young Skeeter is hiding in the woods because she did not get asked to the school dance. She is ashamed of her awkwardness and afraid of disappointing her mother for her lack of conventional beauty and Southern belle charm. Constantine appears and soothes her. She takes the young girl's hand and tells her that ugliness is internal and that she must ignore the cruel comments of her peers. She says, "ask yourself: 'Am I going to believe what those fools say about me today?'" The young girl visibly strengthens. This scene suggests to the audience that Skeeter's liberal values are the result of the wise mammy who taught her how to accept all people, regardless of color. This trope lends itself to the interactions between Aibileen and Mae Mobley, evident in the often-repeated phrase, "you is kind, you is smart, you is important."

Aibileen's voice is heard first in the novel and the film. Yet, the first image the audience encounters is a white hand scribbling the words "The Help" across the top of a notebook page. The disembodied white hand functions in two ways. First, it signifies who holds the power in this film. Skeeter Phelan is a wealthy, white woman. Socially stratified societies rely on intersecting oppressions to determine who has greater access to power and resources.⁷⁶ Skeeter lacks access to complete social, political, and economic power as a woman, but her whiteness ensures her more privilege than Aibileen, who is triply disadvantaged as a poor, black woman. Second, and even more importantly, it comments on who *deserves* better access to power and resources.

It is significant that the first scene of *The Help* is one that actually occurs chronologically later in the film, after Aibileen agrees to help Skeeter with her project. The first image of Aibileen depicts her standing at a kitchen sink, drying dishes. It is unclear, at first, whose house

⁷⁵ Melissa V. Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America*, (New Haven: Yale UP, 2011), 77.

⁷⁶ Jewell, *From Mammy to Miss America*, 58-59

they are in. The white audience, for which this film was made, is accommodated to images of black women performing service tasks. To position Aibileen in this socially subordinated position allows the film to fall in line with other dominant media images. The audience feels safe enough to be what bell hooks so eloquently describes as “vulnerable to the seduction of difference, to seek an encounter with the Other,” without requiring that the audience “relinquish forever mainstream positionality.”⁷⁷ The film reader sees that Skeeter’s hand is guiding this project, which informs their reaction to the rest of the film: instead of seeing the active resistance of brave domestic workers in the Jim Crow South, they see a bold, young, white woman trying to bring civil rights and social justice to her violent and bigoted Southern community.

In Kathryn Stockett’s novel, it is Aibileen who indirectly suggests the idea of writing a book from the perspective of an African-American when she is helping Skeeter answer the Ms. Myrna letters. She says that her son had imagined writing that story before he was killed. Skeeter later imagines a collection of stories written from the perspective of Jackson’s maids, after an agent at Harper and Row dares her to write about more radical topics. Contrarily, the film version depicts Skeeter begging a visibly frightened Aibileen to tell her what it is like to work for a white family. This is unlike the novel’s Aibileen that consistently staged resistance actions both in and out of the boundaries of her employment. Skeeter’s ambition to be a successful writer with Harper and Row is misrepresented in the film as a desire to see civil rights extended to black Americans. Her alliance with the movement doesn’t emerge until much later in the novel. The first chapters reveal her indifference civil rights. Commenting on James Meredith’s enrollment at the University of Mississippi, she says: “I am neither thrilled nor disappointed by the news that they might let a colored man into Ole Miss.”⁷⁸

⁷⁷ bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 23.

⁷⁸ Stockett, Kathryn. *The Help*, (New York: Penguin Group, 2009), 83.

Skeeter's relationship with Stuart, a love interest, is similarly misrepresented in the film. When Skeeter and Aibileen's anonymous memoir is published and the townspeople of Jackson speculate that their maids have been "telling stories," Skeeter's boyfriend guesses that she is the writer. He accuses her of "making trouble" and ends their relationship. In the novel, he simply isn't ready for commitment. Skeeter's betrayal reinforces the idea of her sacrifice.

When Skeeter is offered a position at Harper and Row, she takes it. She recommends Aibileen for the Myrna cleaning advice column to the editor of the local paper. Aibileen is thrilled to acquire a position writing professionally, even though she must maintain her work as a maid for Mrs. Leefolt. The detail of her new professional employment is ignored entirely in the film. Instead, Aibileen is fired in the last scene and the audience watches as she walks home unemployed and is content with her situation because she was honest. She says, "Mae Mobley was my last baby. In just ten minutes the only life I knew was done. God says we need to love our enemies. It hard to do. But, you can start by telling the truth. No one had ever asked me what it feel like to be me. Once I told the truth about that, I felt free."⁷⁹

Neglecting Aibileen's new employment opportunity is indicative of the desire to subordinate domestic work and domestic workers, who are disproportionately women of color. Granting attention to Aibileen's promotion would counter the cultural belief that women of color are better suited for domestic tasks and childcare, a notion that is consistently reproduced by the trope of the mammy order to maintain a racially stratified society that ensures a continuous supply of cheap household labor.⁸⁰

The film adaptation of *The Help* fails to accommodate the more progressive themes of the novel, particularly Skeeter's growing awareness of her own complicity in the maintenance of

⁷⁹ *The Help*, dir. Tate Taylor, 2011.

⁸⁰ Jewell, *From Mammy to Miss America and Beyond*, 58.

systemic racial discrimination. On the first night that she visits Aibileen's house to conduct the interview, she stumbles through her questions. Skeeter is aware that in Aibileen's house, her questions sound casual and juvenile; she says, "on my drive home, I want to kick myself. For thinking I could just waltz in and demand answers. For thinking she'd stop feeling like the maid just because we were at her house, because she wasn't wearing a uniform."⁸¹

Skeeter and Aibileen are silent heroes by the end of the film, but their individual rewards are drastically different: Skeeter is off to a new, exciting life in New York, while Aibileen walks home without a job. This is indicative of the effort to reproduce standards, determined by race, sex, and class, of who is entitled to what social resources and power. Jewell says, "those who were garnering an inordinate amount of society's resources argued that their material and monetary advantage was attributable to higher levels of intelligence and virtues that were absent among the lower classes and [...] African Americans."⁸² The film altered the narrative and presented Skeeter as the mastermind of the project that turned into the book *The Help*. This supplied the audience a successfully reproduced a version of American meritocracy: Skeeter earned her place at Harper and Row. Aibileen, however, is rewarded spiritually, and the audience is satisfied with this, as it replicates mammy's complete devotion to her white child.

Hidden in Plains Sight: American Nationality and *August: Osage County*

The 2013 film *August: Osage County*, directed by John Wells, is adapted from the Pulitzer Prize winning play of the same name, written by Tracey Letts. The opening of the film depicts the brutal, hot Oklahoma landscape and the voice of Beverly, played by Sam Shepard, dictating the words of T.S. Eliot found in *The Wasteland* and reminding the viewer the pain in

⁸¹ Stockett, *The Help*, 146.

⁸² *Ibid*, 8.

knowing that “life is long.” The emotionally charged, dialogue heavy scenes that follow reveal a proud, crumbling family that allegorically comments on the postmodern reality of the American nation, as opposed to its idealized fantasy that pervades popular culture. The Native American personal attendant, Johnna, is the mostly silent character absent from the action of the film, but intimately fixed within it. Johnna’s person reveals that power—both in the house and in contemporary American politics—is not fixed in binaries, but rather the result of the intersecting oppressions of gender, race, class, age and nationality that determine domestic hierarchy.

The action of the film takes place in the family home on the plains of Oklahoma in August. It is hot. The heat takes on a character of its own, an embodiment of the dangerous and oppressive criticisms of Violet Weston (Meryl Streep), the central character of the film. Beverly, Violet’s husband and the father of her children, has disappeared. He has killed himself. Violet’s daughters, Barbara (Julia Roberts), Karen (Juliette Lewis), and Ivy (Julianne Nicholson), are all home to help their mother weather the crisis. The oldest, Barbara, comes from Boulder, Colorado with her estranged husband and teenage daughter. Her husband, a university professor, has recently lost a lot of weight and has begun sleeping with his students, resulting in the dissolution of their marriage. The youngest, Ivy, has remained in her home town to take care of her parents, but is using this opportunity to finally get out. She is planning to move to New York with her boyfriend, who is also her first cousin. It is later revealed that he is her half-brother, the result of an affair between her aunt and her father. The middle child, Karen, shows up for the funeral with her hotshot fiancé, who tries to molest Barbara’s daughter. The remaining characters of the film are Mattie Fae, Violet’s sister, and her husband Charles. Mattie Fae, like Violet, is mean-spirited, obnoxious, and highly critical of the actions of others. She is particularly cruel to her son, Little Charles, Ivy’s boyfriend.

The opening of the film sets the tone for the remaining scenes—a struggle for power between the women in the house. Beverly, the patriarch of the family, is an alcoholic academic and poet who is planning to commit suicide. After the initial scene, he is never seen again. He lives alone with his wife, Violet, a cancer patient and drug addict. His opening monologue, delivered to a character not yet seen, addresses the complicated relationship between T. S. Eliot and his wife Vivienne, who was ultimately institutionalized by the poet himself. Beverley's anecdote reveals the tension in his own marriage when he states, "you have to admire the purity of the survivor's instinct." Beverly explains to a still unseen woman that he is an alcoholic and his wife is addicted to prescription painkillers: "The facts are: my wife takes pills and I drink. That's the bargain we've struck," he states and reveals that his desire to hire a personal attendant for the home is because these addictions have "made burdensome the maintenance of the traditional American routine." From a feminist perspective, this statement hints that while the film depicts a modern household, the couple is stuck in a gendered division of household labor that is determined by unequal power relations. This isn't necessarily anachronistic, but rather reveals the mindset of certain conservative communities, like the Plains, that are stuck in a romanticized version of the American life. The hierarchy of power in the house is determined by relations historically determined by gender, class, and race. Once Beverly disappears, the struggle is between the women.

When Violet stumbles into the study under the influence, Johnna (Misty Upham) is finally revealed through the eyes of the house's mistress. Seeing Johnna through the eyes of Violet depicts the power dynamic between the two women that will function throughout the rest of the film. Phyllis Palmer explains the hiring of household "help" was the charge of the mistress in early 20th century American society. She says "white women formed their identities in relation

to other women, while leaving their relations with men relatively unexamined.”⁸³ Violet says to the dark-skinned woman in her husband’s study, after talking nonsense to her husband *about* the woman in front of her, “Are you an Injun?” Johnna politely reveals that she is Cheyenne. Violet’s question, delivered as an accusation, is structured to establish her authority as the woman of the house. Violet sways as she studies Johnna and says, “You’re very pretty... do you think I’m pretty?” Again, Johnna politely assents. The second question is also delivered to establish her dominant position in the household. Palmer states that, “housewives may have sought ‘alienage’ between themselves and the domestic, whether of race, class, national group, or age.”⁸⁴ Violet’s questions mirror her internal desire to establish her position in the household as one of authority and Johnna’s as that of subordinate. Palmer describes this as establishing the “mind” work of the housewife and the “body” work of the domestic worker. The “mind” was established to reflect her whiteness, middle-class status, and education, which positioned her in a more powerful domestic position. The domestic was corporealized for subordination and to alleviate the guilt the housewife felt for the demanding physical labor saved for her “help”; her race, age, or other physical factors establish her identity as non-white, working class, uneducated and “made for” this type of labor.⁸⁵

The exchange in this scene reveals more about the character of Violet than that of Johnna, which is typical of the rest of the film and the manner in which care workers are considered in contemporary discourse. Violet was once the lovely, American housewife, as it is revealed through the photos that line the hallways of the home she stumbles through in the dark. Beverly’s decision to hire help for Violet intrudes upon her responsibilities and undermines her position of power in the home. Her reaction to Johnna throughout the film reveals her fear of losing that

⁸³ Palmer, *Domesticity and Dirt*, 15.

⁸⁴ Palmer, *Domesticity and Dirt*, 74.

⁸⁵ Palmer, *Domesticity and Dirt*, 74.

power. According to Palmer, “turning over the work of cleaning up intimate areas of life violated strong feelings of family privacy.”⁸⁶ Violet feels thwarted. When Barbara asks about her father’s last day at the house, Violet says “the Indian girl made us biscuits and gravy. We ate some, he walked out the door [...] and that was it.” Violet references Johnna as “the Indian girl” to subordinate her due to her age and perceived lack of American nationality. This conversation continues to reveal Violet’s fear of Johnna taking her only power as the mother in the house—the caregiver. Despite the fact that she was hired to do a job, Violet refers to her as a stranger and reinforces her loathing at having “an *Indian* in [her] house.” Even when Barbara corrects her mother’s diction, offering “Native American” over “Indian,” Violet reveals her fear of subordination by refusing to change the way she references Native Americans. She whines, “let’s just call the dinosaurs Native Americans, while we’re at it.” She believes her authority exceeds Johnna’s in all matters, even when it comes to “what [she] likes to be called.” Violet’s attitude reflects that of many aging Americans who find the identity politics of the past three decades superfluous, unnecessary, and destructive to the hegemonic whiteness that keeps them in a position of power.

In the most emotionally charged scene, the funeral dinner, Violet makes her way around the table delivering harsh criticisms to all in attendance. Even Johnna is attacked when she enters the room only to refill water glasses. Barbara tells the rest of the family that it was Johnna who prepared the entire meal by herself. Violet, threatened by Johnna’s new role as family nurturer, interjects to remind everyone that Johnna is getting paid for her duties. Palmer explains why middle-class housewives opposed federal labor regulations for maids.⁸⁷ The housewife feels unfairly ignored when the hired help is offered gratitude or other incentive that the housewife is

⁸⁶ *ibid.*

⁸⁷ Palmer, *Domesticity and Dirt*, 56.

denied, as she performs the same or similar duties for free as wife and mother. Violet's outburst toward Johnna might reveal more about her bitter feelings toward her children and family, who never stopped to recognize her sacrifices.

August: Osage County depicts the excruciatingly complicated relationship between women in the postmodern household that is still informed by patriarchal divisions of power. While the film did a manageably well job depicting the complexities and nuances of emotion in female characters, it failed to truly evaluate how race determined the power hierarchy in the film. Even the progressively minded university professor failed to acknowledge Johnna for anything other than the household "help." Barbara criticized her mother for failing to use the politically correct identifier in reference to Johnna's heritage, but she followed her censure with the statement, "even if she is an Indian, she makes the best damn apple pie I ever had," implying that Johnna is less-than-American in the surprise at her ability to make apple pie.

The end of the film reveals that Violet had the chance to save her husband from committing suicide, but did not. She blames Barbara: "Think there's any way he would have done what he did if you were here? No, just him and me, here in this house, in the dark, left to ourselves, abandoned, wasted lifetimes devoted to your care and comfort." Violet chose not to save her husband to prove she had the power all along. She says to the empty space he left in the house, "you want to show who's stronger, Bev? Nobody's stronger than me, goddamnit." Barbara finally leaves. She was last, after her other sisters gave up and left in order to pull some happiness out of their lives, and her own family drove back to Colorado. Violet realizes that she is alone and calls out the names of her husband and children. The silence that calls back disarms her. The film ends with Violet calling the name of the "Indian who lives in [her] attic" and collapsing into Johnna's arms. Johnna rocks her sobbing body and whispers a later line from T.S.

Eliot's *The Wasteland*, "This is the way the world ends... this is the way the world ends," and Violet says "and then you're gone."

Welfare (in) Queens: Immigration Commentary in *The Nanny*

In the fall of 1993, Fran Drescher first appeared as the brassy, but lovable, Nanny Fine to the WASP-y children of a famous Broadway producer on the CBS sitcom *The Nanny*. The show, co-created by Drescher and Peter Marc Jacobson, ran for nine seasons with both domestic and international success. The idea for the show came to while shopping in London one afternoon with her friend's teenage daughter in tow, whom she described as the typical "British boarding-school girl." The girl complained about the pain her new shoes were giving her, to which Drescher saucily replied, "well, step on the backs of them, honey."⁸⁸ Drescher marked the humor of the moment—the Queens-born, Jewish-American woman giving advice to the prim young English girl in a way that came across as maternal. The exchange will seem familiar to fans of *The Nanny*, as it is similar to many of the conversations Nanny Fine has with her awkward, teenaged charge, Maggie Sheffield.

The comedy that made *The Nanny* a favorite throughout the 1990's is built upon "blue collar meets blue blood"⁸⁹ humor that masks the racialized, gendered, and class based inequalities that reinforce the exploitation of female labor, specifically that of women of color in domestic service positions in the U.S. The Jewish-American character of Nanny Fine, and the dynamic she maintains with other characters on the show perpetuate white supremacist, patriarchal ideologies that inform the divisions of labor and the associated household hierarchy

⁸⁸ Denise Abbot, "Enter Winning," *Hollywood Reporter*, May, 21, 1997, accessed April 27, 2014. <http://home.frognet.net/~ritchie/hreenterwinning.htm>.

⁸⁹ "Background Story," <http://www.thenanny.com/nannystory.html>.

that maintain unequal access to power in the contemporary U.S. political and cultural landscape. In what follows, I will first provide a synopsis of the show and its central characters, followed by a brief history of domestic work and domestic workers in the United States. Then, I will analyze the way in which the central thematic elements of the show, introduced in the pilot episode, reinforce exploitative and oppressive ideologies that limit the power of domestic workers during a critical six-year period in American politics that responded to the growing number of immigrant women in the United States as the result of the liberalization of the national economy, globalization, and xenophobic anti-immigration efforts.

The pilot episode of *The Nanny* appeared on November 3, 1993. Fran Fine, a loud, street-wise, Jewish-American woman in Flushing, New York, is working in the bridal shop owned by her boyfriend, to whom she is “pre-engaged.” When she begs her pre-fiancé to set a date and to pick a ring, she is both fired and dumped before the opening credits roll. Fine takes a job caring for the children of the famous Broadway producer and widower, Maxwell Sheffield (Charles Shaughnessy). Sheffield is portrayed as the clichéd British “gentleman”—handsome, refined, and wealthy. These characteristics frequently clash with Fine’s, making for many situations in which her “low-class” upbringing and traits associated with her Jewish ethnicity are comically ridiculed. Sheffield’s three children are Fine’s charges: Maggie (Nichole Tom), a shy, insecure teenager; Brighton (Benjamin Salisbury), a clever, mischievous, school-aged boy; and Grace (Madeline Zima), the very serious, analytical six-year-old in therapy, who is equal parts Shirley Temple and Charles Baudelaire. Niles (Daniel Davis) is the witty, sophisticated, English butler whose family has been employed by the Sheffield’s for at least two generations. Niles has an affinity for gossip and frequently spars with Sheffield’s business partner, C.C. Babcock (Lauren Lane). Babcock is a power-driven career woman who is hopelessly enamored with Sheffield and

harbors a strong distaste for Nanny Fine, the emergent foil in her plan to become the next Mrs. Sheffield. The majority of the action occurs within the walls of the home, and the humor is siphoned out of the awkward situations that arise when the low-class Nanny makes herself conspicuous in Sheffield's upper-class residence and social circles. From the first episode, an obvious sexual tension develops between Nanny Fine and Mr. Sheffield, a thread that carries the show to its final season, in which the couple marries and Fine delivers twins.⁹⁰

The Nanny promotes the misguided impression that domestic work is a temporary job for the young woman seeking to establish her independence, but not yet married and managing a home of her own—with the emphasis on *yet*. Fine's fairy-tale ending shirks the facts regarding domestic service as employment in today's cultural and political landscape: the work is primarily performed by women of color, often for less than minimum wage and with few of the federal labor protections afforded to other workers. This dangerous assumption is augmented by the predominance of undocumented Latinas in the field, who are the most vulnerable to exploitation and abuse at the hands of employers.

The Nanny premiered eleven months after allegations against Zoe Baird emerged regarding her employment of an undocumented Peruvian woman, Lillian Cordero, to nanny her child. In January of 1993, President Bill Clinton announced the nomination of Zoe Baird, a corporate lawyer, for the position of Attorney General of the United States. Baird's failure to pay

⁹⁰ Judith Rollins tracks the association between domestics and concubinage throughout the Ancient worlds to reveal that sexual objectification and exploitation is a historically consistent characteristic of domestic work. Sexual objectification and exploitation is one of them. Interestingly enough, the first images of domestic workers in the United States, the doting black mammy, attempted to present the women as overtly asexual. While mammy's most emphasized trait was her cheerful obsequiousness, she was often physically depicted as overweight and matronly. Today, however, domestic workers are likely to be depicted as young and sexy, but still entirely devoted to the family she serves. This change presents an exciting area for future research. The new sexy mammy can be understood socioeconomically as an imperative to consider domestic work as a temporary occupation for women and undeserving of federal regulation, as she will soon either marry her boss and do the same work for free, or get a "better" job. Cultural scholarship could track the prevalence of white men in relationships with young, exotic women, arguably a result of the U.S. women's liberation movement that shifted social, political, and economic power dynamics. White American men seek out women they read as ethnic or exotic, believing they maintain more traditional feminine and nurturing qualities.

social security taxes on her employee was met with intense political outcry, and her nomination was withdrawn. Feminists were outraged, arguing that if Baird had been male, the questions of who was to care for her children, whether or not she employed a nanny, and whether or not that nanny was documented would never have been asked. Cordero's situation was never mentioned, deliberated, or examined. The social and political reasons that resulted in her immigration to the United States, her living conditions while here, and whether or not she was treated fairly or compensated appropriately never entered public conversation and was ignored by the white feminist community. Nor was her forced deportation after the incident publicized. During this time, xenophobic rhetoric regarding undocumented immigrants usurping public resources was at its peak, and *The Nanny* reinforced the prevailing public attitude toward domestic work, further subjugating the women who worked in these positions by rendering their exploitation invisible and their low social status as deserved.

In the pilot episode of *The Nanny*, Fran Fine takes a job as a makeup salesgirl and travels to Manhattan to peddle her wares after she is fired from the bridal shop. She unknowingly knocks on the door of the famous Broadway producer, Maxwell Sheffield. The butler, Niles, mistakes her for the nanny sent from "the agency," who is expected to interview with Sheffield that afternoon. Fine quickly jumps at the chance to take a job working in the house that is "nicer than [her] Uncle Jack's condo in Boca, and [...] he bought the model." Niles asks to take her resume in order to present it to Mr. Sheffield, to which Ms. Fine declines, stating that she would rather present it herself, and hurriedly drafts a resume in lipstick when Niles exits. When Sheffield offers Fran the position, she heartily accepts and is thrilled to move into the mansion and out of her mother's house.

The racialized history of domestic work is built upon the legacy of slavery and the expectation of service from a subordinated group. Fine's light skin tone reflects the multiculturalist conviction that color is not a signifier of status or power in contemporary U.S. society. Her whiteness communicates that the United States is a post-racial, meritocratic nation, in which those who work the hardest reap the best rewards. When she later is discharged from her position, she passionately asserts, "you can't fire me, I quit!" before quickly changing her mind, offering, "No, you fired me. That way I can collect unemployment!" further promoting the false notion that poor women of color are poor because they seek handouts over hard work. Fran's adult dependence on others throughout the show reflects this discourse.

Sheffield's English nationality similarly provides commentary on what constitutes a "good" and "bad" immigrant. Sheffield's character provided the model of an ideal immigrant: rich, Anglo, male. During the mid-1990s, as xenophobic public policy was signed into law, Americans sought cultural productions that reinforced their own beliefs about Latino immigrants as usurpers of their hard-earned public resources. Sheffield's self-sufficiency reified the American belief that it was laziness, not poverty wages and systemic discrimination, behind the need for welfare benefits.

Throughout U.S. history, immigration has been considered a "plague, infection, or infestation and immigrants as disease, varmints or invaders."⁹¹ In the 1980's the popular perception of the undocumented immigrant was the single man coming to work in the United States to send remittances home. However, in the 1990's the political rhetoric shifted. It was no longer the lone man traveling to the United States to "steal jobs" from American citizens; it was rather a pregnant woman crossing the Mexico-American border in order to raise children off

⁹¹ Chang, *Disposable Domestic*, 2.

usurped American public funds. In 1986, 47 percent of Americans revealed in a poll that they believed the majority of immigrants “wind up on welfare.”⁹²

In the 1990’s, hostility toward immigrants metastasized into full blown xenophobia, and legal, permanently residing Latinos had their rights questioned and invalidated.⁹³ In 1996, President Bill Clinton signed into law the Immigrant Reform Act and Individual Responsibility Act, part of which socially and legally disenfranchised legal U.S. citizens and undocumented immigrants, the majority women and children.⁹⁴ The second purpose of the law, termed “welfare reform,” eliminated social-safety net programs, such as Aid to Families with Dependent Children and replaced these programs with block grants assigned to states with the idea that the “handouts” were only enabling the poor. The law made it so that children born to undocumented immigrants in the United States were not eligible for any state services or benefits, except emergency services. For many families, these resources were essential for keeping out of poverty.

⁹² Ibid, 4.

⁹³ Ibid, 13.

⁹⁴ Ibid18.

Conclusion

A More Progressive Vision? *Devious Maids* in Intimate Publics

This thesis has revealed the way in which film and television present false and incomplete portrayals of domestic workers in order to subordinate their status in society and justify the low pay and poor working conditions they suffer. Their oppression is intersectional, at the nexus of gender, race, and class oppressions. The National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA) is currently working to improve working conditions and elevate wages on a state-by-state basis, having already passed a Domestic Worker's Bill of Rights in five states. The next battle for the ratification of the Domestic Worker's Bill of Rights is in Illinois. The document calls for domestic workers to have the right to more than the minimum wage, the right to be paid for all of the hours worked, the right to at least one day off per week, and the right to meals and rest periods.⁹⁵ The NDWA is also lobbying at the national and international level, working with the Department of Labor (DLO) and International Labor Organization (ILO), to obtain these protections for all workers worldwide. In 2013, NDWA and Caring Across Generations won a substantial victory when the Department of Labor released new regulations to cover care workers in private homes. The DOL called for all home care workers to be paid the federal minimum wage and be guaranteed pay for overtime; however, homecare corporations filed a lawsuit before the law went into effect, causing states to delay implementing the law.⁹⁶ Nevertheless, as Poo has explained, even if these efforts are successful, the number of undocumented workers in these positions provides an additional hurdle for activists. Undocumented workers are less likely to file

⁹⁵ "Domestic Workers Bill of Rights," National Domestic Workers Alliance, accessed July 2, 2015, <http://www.domesticworkers.org/illinois-bill-of-rights>.

⁹⁶ "Department of Labor Regulations for Home Care Workers," National Domestic Workers Alliance, accessed July 2, 2015. <http://www.domesticworkers.org/department-of-labor-regulations-for-home-care-workers>.

grievances if they are abused or exploited. Workers who do are likely to be fired or threatened with deportation. Furthermore, history has shown that employers are unlikely to follow the law, especially if their workers are undocumented immigrants, as they do not consider their home as someone's workplace. The efforts to obtain policy change are critical, but so is a shift in the social perception of domestic workers and the women, largely undocumented women of color, who perform the labor. Ideology works through images and a more progressive imagining of domestic work and domestic workers is still needed.

The 2013 Lifetime television show *Devious Maids* features four Latinas working as maids for the rich and powerful in Beverly Hills. In the pilot episode of the show, Flora Hernandez is murdered at a crowded party at the mansion of her employers, Evelyn and Adrian Powell. It is revealed that she had had an affair with Adrian Powell, but it is unclear who murdered her. At her funeral, a woman overhears three maids discussing Flora's "secret" and arguing over whether or not they should tell the police. The eavesdropper is Marisol Suarez (Ana Ortiz), a college professor and the mother of the young man who was framed for Flora's murder. Marisol is desperate to get her son out of prison and vows to find the real murderer of Flora Hernandez through posing as a maid in Beverly Hills and befriending the three maids who knew Flora's secret.

Marisol takes a job working in the home of Michael and Taylor Stappord as a live-in maid. Mrs. Stappord is the *new* Mrs. Stappord, a young woman Michael Stappord once hired as an escort and fell in love with. During the interview with Marisol, Taylor remarks on her lack of accent and explains that she has never known a maid without an accent. Marisol replies that she was born in Los Angeles, but this does not satisfy Taylor. She says it sounds like Marisol went to college and whispers to her husband that she doesn't like her "attitude." This dynamic is typical

of the relationship between the wife of the household and the woman she hires to take over the duties of housework and childcare. Judith Rollins explains: “the domestic is asked to be inferior in her material conditions, in her intelligence, her appearance, and sometimes even her character.”⁹⁷ Marisol’s appearance codes her as middle class and her articulate speech is not deferential enough for Taylor; however, she pleads for the opportunity, readjusting the power dynamic through begging to secure her position in the house.

Marisol meets the rest of the maids at a lunch table in the park a week later. It is her new employment at the Stappords that secures her place of confidence in the circle. The maids begin discussing their employers, a common resistance tactic among domestic workers. Gossip acts as a sort of release valve, in which the domestic workers are able to vent their frustrations and, as Rollins so acutely states, “deflect [the] psychological attacks on their personhood, their adulthood, their dignity.”⁹⁸ It is at the lunch table that Marisol makes the connections and gathers the information she needs to make the case for her son’s innocence. The maids she befriends work in the homes of the same neighborhood as Flora’s employers, the Powells.

Zoila Diaz (Judy Reyes) and her daughter Valentina (Edy Ganem) both work for Genevieve Delatour (Susan Lucci). Mrs. Delatour is eccentric and loveable, yet hopelessly unable to care for herself. She has been married six times and is in the process of finding husband number seven because her financial manager ran away with all of her money. Zoila has worked for Mrs. Delatour for over twenty-years and is the obvious emotional rock and moral compass for the family. In the pilot episode, Zoila is first found coaxing Mrs. Delatour out from under her luxurious canopy bed. She has tried to kill herself by swallowing a bottle of pills because she says she is depressed; however, it is suggested that this is a repeatedly occurring

⁹⁷ Rollins, *Between Women*, 194.

⁹⁸ Rollins, *Between Women*, 212.

action and Mrs. Delatour's emotional state is far from stable. Valentina, who is in love with Mrs. Delatour's son, Remy, suggests that the boy move out of the dorms at the University of Southern California and back home to keep his mother company. Throughout the first season, Valentina plots to form a relationship with Remy that is frequently thwarted by her mother. Zoila's protectiveness stems from her own experience falling in love with Mrs. Delatour's brother, only to be dumped for a white woman from a similarly privileged background. Zoila is desperate to free her daughter from a life of domestic servitude, working extra days to save up for the fashion school Valentina had been accepted to and selling a diamond ring that had been a gift from Mrs. Delatour. The gift, while expensive, was a hand-me-down from one of Mrs. Delatour's failed marriages.

Carmen Luna (Roselyn Sanchez) is an ambitious singer that who a job as a maid in the home of a popular Latin singer Alejandro Rubio. Carmen hopes that her connection to Rubio will make it easier for her to break into the industry. She hopes he will recognize her talent and help her get her album produced. Carmen's efforts are frequently thwarted by the Russian house manager, Odessa. Odessa is cranky and tough, but it is later revealed that she was once a famous Russian ballerina. Her dancing career ended when she discovered she had bone cancer and was forced to have her leg amputated. Once her secret is revealed, she and Carmen form a close relationship and Carmen performs Odessa's duties while she is in chemotherapy. Alejandro's butler, Sam, is Carmen's love interest, but by the end of season one, Carmen choses to leave Sam in order to marry Alejandro. Their relationship is purely economic. Alejandro is gay, but he is not ready to come out to his fan base. He approaches Carmen to marry him, promising to produce her album if she pretends to be his wife for two years.

Rosie Falta (Dania Ramirez) works as the nanny and housekeeper for Peri and Spence Westmore, who are both famous actors. Rosie cares tenderly for the Westmore's son, Tucker. Her own child, Miguel, is still in Mexico. Throughout the first season, Rosie is desperately trying to find ways to bring Miguel to the United States. Peri Westmore is rude, vindictive, and critical of those around her. Spence is the emasculated husband, frequently the object of Peri's rage. In the first season, Rosie walks in on Mrs. Westmore sleeping with one of her co-stars. Believing that Spence is a good husband and father, she decides not to tell him because she doesn't want to break up their family. However, Spence is in love with Rosie and the two begin having an affair. Rosie ends the affair when Mrs. Westmore borrows a private plane from her studio to bring Miguel to the United States. This is not an act of kindness, but rather a way to keep Rosie silent. Peri was involved in a hit-and-run accident with a jogger, and Rosie is the only one who knows her secret.

Devious Maids is progressive in its representations of domestic workers as having power and agency in their households, but ultimately, the caricatured portrayals of the employers and the melodramatic spirit of the show overshadows any potential for the radical reimagining needed to shift cultural attitudes. The maids are intelligent, complex characters with complicated lives. Viewers identify with their struggles as waged workers and as *lower class* than the Beverly Hills millionaires they work for. It is the rich and powerful elite who are not characterized fully. They are comical and sensationalized, evading the spotlight and evading criticism for their role in maintaining exploitative labor conditions.

Devious Maids loses its revolutionary potential by its gender-marked and "juxtapolitical" nature. Berlant explains that women's culture is "juxtapolitical" in that it can allow political

discussion to be approximate to the story line, but ultimately eclipsed by sentimentalism.⁹⁹ There are multiple instances throughout the first season in which political and social problems are experienced or acknowledged by the maids, but not extrapolated on. Their struggles are rendered humorous and comical, denying their relevancy to the lives of domestic workers and the urgent need for structural reform. In the pilot episode, Peri Westmore walks in on Rosie making a phone call to Mexico to speak with her young son. She is crying and explains to Mrs. Westmore that her son is too young to understand why she left him to come to the United States to work. His father died, and she must earn money to send home for his care. Despite Rosie's tears, Mrs. Westmore explains that she must leave and get a facial for an interview the following day. Rosie hisses through her tears, "Don't worry, I'll take care of your baby," and Westmore leaves. This scene is revealing of the current global feminization of migration. Immigrant women travel to first world nations in order to take jobs caring for the young, sick and elderly in order to produce an economic system in which the U.S. state bears no responsibility for the reproductive care work required of its citizens. Ironically, these same women are leaving their own families at home and working in the United States to pay for someone to care for *their* young, sick, or elderly family members.¹⁰⁰ During her interview, Westmore gushes to the journalist about the love and devotion she feels toward her infant son and husband. Rosie busts into the interview, exclaiming, "Mrs. Westmore! Tucker just said his first word!" Westmore would typically never care about anything her son does, but because she is on camera she takes the bait and asks what he said. Rosie says, "He called me mama!" Rosie stages her resistance to Westmore, but it lacks any criticism of the structural nature of the problem she faces; it is rather communicated that

⁹⁹ Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, x.

¹⁰⁰ Chang, *Disposable Domesticity*, 13

Westmore is evil and uncaring as an *individual person*, not as a beneficiary of the exploitation of third world labor for the economic benefit of first world nations.

Lauren Berlant theorizes intimate publics in *The Female Complaint*. She explains that intimate publics are spaces in which the political is presented as the personal and women “harness the power of emotion to change what is structural in the world.”¹⁰¹ *Devious Maids* isn’t meant for maids, or not specifically. It is marketed toward women who disproportionately make up low-wage, service-based workers in the United States as waitresses, retail workers, administrative support, and domestic service. Intimate publics desire to draw lines through race and class and to portray a shared interest and mode-of-being among women. It must be communicated that happiness and belonging is found through love, understanding, and relationships. Berlant explains: “The intimate public legitimates qualities, ways of being, and entire lives that have otherwise been deemed puny or discarded. It creates situations where those qualities can appear as luminous.”¹⁰² The dissatisfaction they face as poor workers is assuaged by the emotional benefits they receive from relationships and the hope for future gratification.

Pop culture produces television shows and films like *The Help*, *August: Osage County*, and *Devious Maids* that feature blatantly, antagonistically racist characters to communicate the message that racism no longer exists as a structural barrier in the United States, or that if racism is encountered, it is localized to a small group of bad individuals. In Part Two, I have demonstrated how these images communicate perceptions of the worth of the labor of domestic workers to maintain an inequitable distribution of social and political power and economic resources in the U.S. I recall sitting in the movie theatre when *The Help* premiered, surrounded by mostly middle-aged white women, who cheered, clapped and laughed for Minnie when she

¹⁰¹ Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, 13

¹⁰² Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, 3.

served Hilly a piece of her famous chocolate pie and said “Eat my shit.” This trivial, momentary retribution for the daily, aggressive racism that Minnie experienced was enough gratification for the audience. They felt Hilly got what she deserved and they walked out of the theatre unaware of their daily complicity in systemic manifestations of white supremacy. Furthermore, they took with them the notion that satisfaction and justice could be found in interpersonal interactions, rather than collective, political resistance. bell hooks explains:

“Simply by expressing their desire for intimate contact with black people, white people do not eradicate the politics of racial domination as they are made manifest in personal interaction. Mutual recognition of racism, its impact both on those who are dominated and those who dominate, is the only standpoint that makes possible an encounter between races that is not based on denial and fantasy.”¹⁰³

Rosie and Minnie both had their moment of resistance, their moment of retribution. But though the system that oppresses them is systemic, their resistance is individual and fleeting. In order for substantive change in the field of domestic and care work, a “mutual recognition of racism,” is required from employers and employees.¹⁰⁴ Both must understand the legacy attached to domestic work and its unique characteristics as an occupation that keeps it socially and economically subordinated. To achieve a mutual recognition of discrimination among racial and class lines, representations of this type of communication must replace those on the big screens that aid in the proliferation of white-supremacist and patriarchal belief systems. More shows with progressive, complex characters are required that do not promote sentimentalist versions of real life marketed toward a women’s public. Rather, accurate portrayals of the social, political, and economic struggles low-wage women workers encounter in their daily lives are needed to teach

¹⁰³ hooks, *Black Looks*, 23.

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*

the public what to demand from those who make the rules that govern their lives. Contemporary representations, such as those described in this thesis, fail to do this and instead promote misguided notions of domestic work and workers, aiding in their socioeconomic marginalization. If ideology is communicated through mass mediated images, as Debord describes, a new, progressive collection of images is needed to replace those that marginalize certain social groups, in order to allow for a new imagining of American life and citizenship. It is not to say that more progressive film and television will alter socioeconomic relations in the U.S. by itself, but it can aid in an analysis of the current cultural climate and how those attitudes shape the way Americans vote and select their representatives. Without this critical cultural analysis, the images consumed in mass media will have the power to dictate who gets access to what political, economic, and social benefits in the United States today.

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