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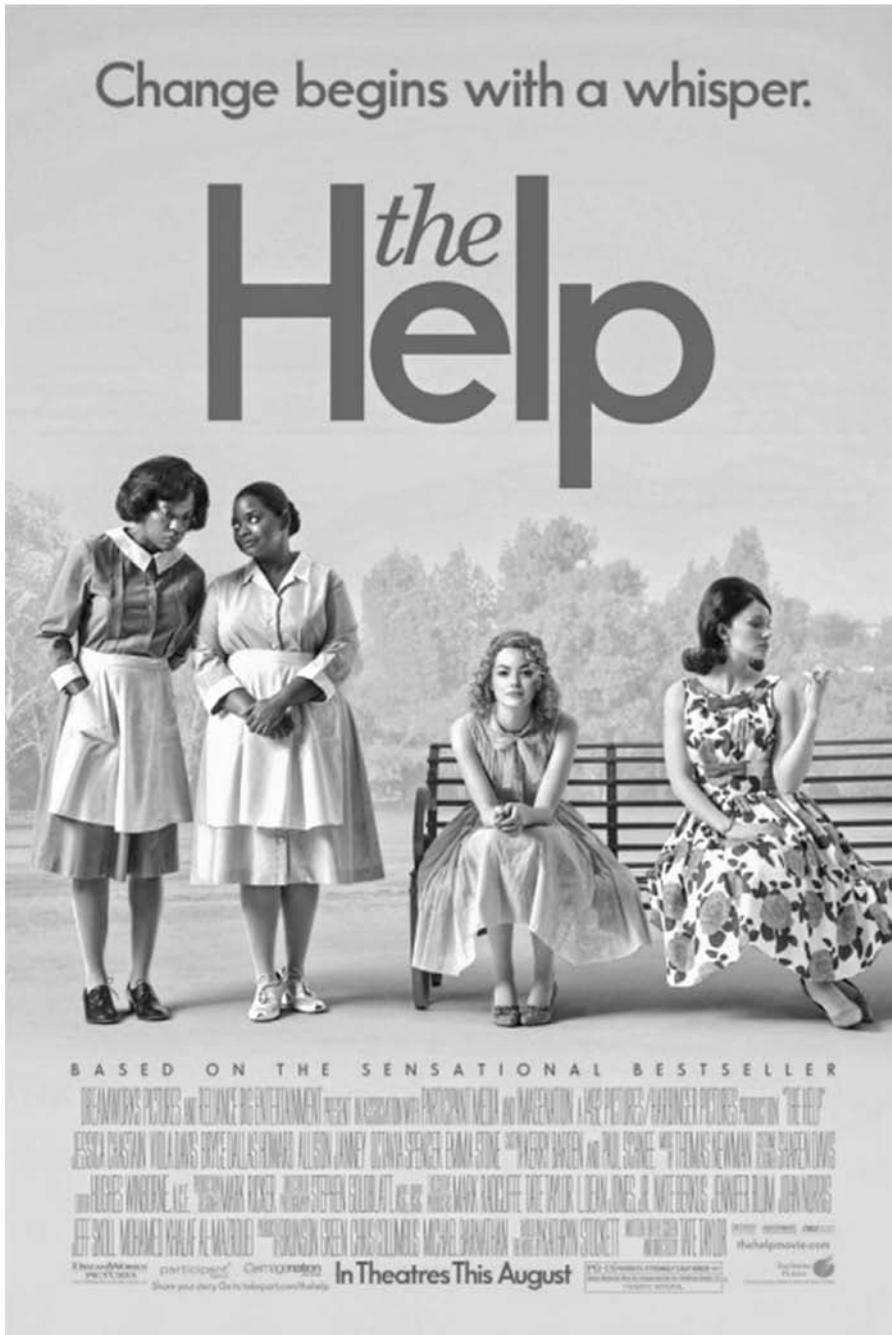
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The Divided Reception of *The Help*

by **Suzanne W. Jones**

The Help was number one on the New York Times bestseller list for over a year after its publication in 2009. By the time the movie was released, the book had sold 3 million copies, spent more than two years on the New York Times bestseller list, and been published in 35 countries and translated into three languages. Three months after the film's release, it had grossed \$160 million at the box office. The *Help* movie poster, © DreamWorks Pictures, 2011.



Whe reception of Kathryn Stockett's *The Help* (2009) calls to mind the reception of two other novels about race relations by southern white writers: Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind* (1936) and William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967). Like *Gone With the Wind*, *The Help* has been a pop culture phenomenon—prominent in bookstores and box offices, and the “darling of book clubs everywhere.” In January 2012 when I asked students in my Women in Modern Literature class what was the best book they had recently read by a woman, most named either *The Help* or *The Hunger Games*. And not surprisingly. *The Help* was number one on the *New York Times* bestseller list for over a year after its publication in 2009. Similarly, the movie held the number one spot in box offices for several weeks after it was released in August 2011, thereby propelling the trade paperback back up the *New York Times* bestseller list, where it remained a year later. By the time the movie was released, the book had sold 3 million copies, spent more than two years on the *New York Times* bestseller list, and been published in 35 countries and translated into three languages. Three months after the film's release, it had grossed \$160 million at the box office. Both novel and film have been discussed in likely television venues, such as *The View*, as well as in unlikely ones, such as *Hardball* (Chris Matthews loved it). Add to that, DVD purchases, Netflix rentals, and e-books (one of the most downloaded e-books of all time), and readership and viewership of *The Help* may someday surpass that of *Gone With the Wind*. Readers from coast to coast made it the most checked-out book in the country for 2010 and 2011. Both novel and film were nominated for awards. The novel won prizes at home (BookExpo America's Indies Choice Award, the Southern Independent Booksellers Alliance Award for Fiction, the state of Georgia's Townsend Prize) and abroad (the UK's Orange Prize, South Africa's Boeke Prize, and the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award). And director Tate Taylor received the Writers Guild of America, West's Paul Selvin Award for his adapted screenplay. While *The Help* did not win the Oscar for best picture or Viola Davis for best actress, Octavia Spencer did win for best supporting actress, and the film “walked away with the most kudos at the 43rd NAACP Image Awards, taking home the top prize for outstanding motion picture and nabbing actress and supporting actress honors for Davis and Spencer.”¹

But despite these accolades from both predominantly white and black organizations, Nkiru Nzegwu, the editor of *JENdA: A Journal of Culture and African Women Studies*, sees a black-white dividing line in the film's reception: “White viewers see complexity where many black viewers see crass simplification. Whites believe they have finally grasped the existential pathos of black southern life in the 1960s but blacks beg to differ, pointing to the cavalier dismissal of white supremacist violence and the tone-deaf representation that fails to see or acknowledge their humanity, as well as refuses to grasp the manner in which white privilege is propped up by insti-

tutionalized racism and racial bigotry. Whites hope that *The Help* has revealed the common humanity of all, while African Americans fear that the crudely sketched images of themselves may end up reinforcing old stereotypes.”²

However, judging from viewers’ comments on polling websites, the reception of the film is not as polarized or predictable as critics of popular culture have imagined. Although many white viewers have “loved” the film, and no doubt for some of the reasons Nzegwu mentions, a good many white viewers have panned it, as Mary did on Amazon.com, “Sugary sweet, 3 hankie tear-jerker, crowd pleasing & deeply dishonest.” Judging *The Help* as “yet another entry to the *Driving Miss Daisy* genre of feel-good, simplistic examinations of topics that in truth are not easy, simple,” Mary goes on to say, “The solace I have, as I reflect on *The Help*, is that there WERE brave, noble white people who wanted to bring equality to The South: Andrew Goodman & Michael Schwerner. They didn’t end up at big jobs in NYC. They ended up dead.” This sentiment occurs frequently enough on these forums to suggest a deep desire, at least by some white viewers and readers, not to be seen as naïve or ignorant about the violence of the Civil Rights era, which figures only in the background of *The Help*, or about institutional racism, a subject Stockett does not take up. While many black viewers, as Nzegwu suggested, have found Stockett’s characters stereotypical and the portrayal of black life simplistic, many other African American viewers, like Minerva Bryant, have praised *The Help* as a revelation of the hardships of black domestics: “It is not a well kept secret, but this is the first time I can say the truth is being told . . . Yes, it may have taken someone from the other race to help ‘put it out there,’ but that was the instrument that opened the eyes of the world regarding the struggles of ‘colored’ maids/help. I thank God for ‘The Help,’ and the cast was SUPER!” Still other black and white viewers, much like Rashun, who is African American, viewed the film merely as “entertainment”: “I wasn’t looking for a lesson in race relations. I have a life experience of that from living and traveling in America and other places. The actresses in this movie made it good to me . . . Good stories and good performances.”³

While no doubt a larger percentage of white than black general readers and viewers have embraced *The Help*, it seems, at least from perusing comments on polling websites such as CinemaScore and Amazon.com, that praise for the film and the novel has definitely crossed racial lines. Both black and white general viewers have termed the film “excellent” and defended its limited focus on race relations in the domestic sphere, much as director Taylor did, as “the last remaining facet of the story that hasn’t been told.” Most general readers posting on Amazon.com and other websites have praised *The Help* as “one of the best books I’ve read in 2009—maybe the best,” and many are confident it will become “a classic.” Like several readers, S. J. Woolf-Wade would like to make the novel required reading, “All Americans need to read this book!” Still others, such as “tkmom,” feel the



While The Help did not win the Oscar for best picture or Viola Davis for best actress, Octavia Spencer did win for best supporting actress, and the film “walked away with the most kudos at the 43rd NAACP Image Awards.” Viola Davis (standing, foreground), Octavia Spencer (seated, obscured), and fellow actors on set, 2010, courtesy of Lex Williams.

same about the film, “This is a classic which should be shown over and over again so that the youngsters of today can understand why people feel about others the way they do. This feeling is not limited only to African Americans but also to all races who are subservient to others.” *The Help* is most often mentioned by both black and white readers as “rivaling such treasures as *To Kill a Mockingbird*,” although almost as many other readers are upset that a novel they think of as popular entertainment is compared to one they consider great literature. None, however, seem aware of the recent academic debate swirling around the racial politics of *To Kill a Mockingbird*—from Eric Sundquist, who views Atticus Finch’s defense of Tom Robinson as southern incrementalism, to Christopher Metress, who argues that Harper Lee has embedded Sundquist’s very critique of Atticus in her novel.⁴

A more prominent dividing line in reader and viewer reception of *The Help* than race would seem to be between general audiences and academics. This division was forecast by the difference between the *USA Today*’s glowing review of Stockett’s

“thought-provoking debut novel” (“one of the best debut novels of 2009”) with its “pitch-perfect depiction of a country’s gradual path toward integration” and Janet Maslin’s mixed response in the *New York Times* to what she termed a “problematic but ultimately winning novel,” “a story that purports to value the maids’ lives while subordinating them to Skeeter and her writing ambitions.”⁵ This divided reception recalls the reception of *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, which won a Pulitzer Prize in 1968 but was critiqued mightily in the same year by “Ten Black Writers,” and subsequently by white scholars upset by the liberties Styron took with Nat Turner’s known history, particularly scenes in which Turner fantasizes about raping a white woman and in which he has a homosexual encounter with a slave boy, both of which they charged originated in and played on stereotypes. Some of the ten black scholars collected in *Styron’s Nat Turner* were equally incensed by Styron’s cultural appropriation. Subsequently, African American scholars, such as historian Julian Bond, who introduced Styron at the University of Virginia, and most recently literary critic Henry Louis Gates Jr., have historicized the response to cultural appropriation as rooted in the aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement and have emphasized that the key question should not be *who* can write about whom, but *how* the writer tells the story.⁶ After the attacks on Styron’s novel, white writers were reluctant to write from a black point of view. Not until twenty years later did Ellen Douglas find a way to do so with her postmodern novel, *Can’t Quit You, Baby* (1988), which academics have lauded.

As with Styron’s novel, some general readers have accused Stockett of cultural appropriation, of “getting rich off the backs of a story that is NOT hers to tell.” Anticipating this criticism, Stockett attempted to neutralize the charge in *The Help* by having Skeeter bring up this concern to Aibileen. But the issue became a real-life problem for Stockett when her brother’s maid Ablene Cooper brought a lawsuit, charging that Stockett had stolen her story and her name. Not surprisingly, Stockett insisted that her characters are fictional, each an amalgam of several people. For example, she said that the feisty outspokenness of actress Octavia Spencer, whom she met while writing the novel, was an inspiration for her character Minny. What is surprising is that Stockett naively used a name and a nickname for her character Aibileen/Aibee, which is identical in pronunciation to Ablene Cooper’s. Before the lawsuit was filed, Stockett explained, both in interviews and in the acknowledgments and afterword to the novel, that the story was inspired by her memories of Demetrie, her childhood caretaker, and augmented by information gleaned from such sources as Susan Tucker’s *Telling Memories Among Southern Women: Domestic Workers and Their Employers in the Segregated South* (1988). In dismissing Ablene Cooper’s lawsuit because “a one-year statute of limitations had elapsed between the time Stockett gave Cooper a copy of the book and when the lawsuit was filed against her,” the judge may have done little to lay the matter of appropriation to rest for some general readers.⁷

Much of the scholarly criticism of the film has been heaped on Hollywood for always choosing to tell the help's story from Miss Daisy's perspective, making a white character the heroic savior of helpless black people. In her introduction to a special issue on the film, Nzegwu argues that films "such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962), *Mississippi Burning* (1988), *Ghosts of Mississippi* (1996), and now *The Help* (2011) derive from the center of white solipsism, to redeem the tarnished reputation of racist whites": "This strategy of presenting only the stories of good, sympathetic, upright white defenders of hapless Blacks enables Hollywood to mask the extraordinary courage, and the powerful human interest stories of black agency challenging a frightful, murderous system. By mischaracterizing racism as racial prejudice and representing it as based on ignorance, films like *The Help* transform the South into an idyllic world, minimally marked by segregation and racism."⁸

Agreeing with Nzegwu, many scholars, no matter their race or ethnicity, have focused on Stockett's stereotypical portrayal of both black and white characters and her sanitized depiction of the Civil Rights era. But African American scholars have been far quicker to comment in the public forum than white scholars. They have written op-eds in such prominent newspapers as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, as well as commented on radio, television, and blogs. On August 12, 2011, a few days after the film was released, the Association of Black Women Historians posted a response to *The Help* on Amazon.com [see the sidebar on page 32], which praised the performances of the African American actresses in the film, but drew attention to shortcomings in both the novel and the film: "the disappointing resurrection" of the Mammy stereotype, which allows "mainstream America to ignore the systemic racism that bound black women to back-breaking, low paying jobs where employers routinely exploited them"; the misrepresentation of African American speech and culture"; the "misleading" depiction of black men as abusive and absent; the failure to depict the sexual harassment of black women; the absence of "the reign of terror" perpetuated by the Ku Klux Klan and the White Citizens Council, but also of the black activists who responded. In general, they point out that *The Help* is not an accurate or realistic portrayal of black people or the time period, but rather "the coming-of-age story of a white protagonist, who uses myths about the lives of black women to make sense of her own."⁹ That the Association of Black Women Historians posted their analysis of *The Help* on the Amazon.com website is testimony to their understandable concern with how perspectives on the Civil Rights era and African Americans might be shaped by Stockett's limited focus in *The Help*, even though the novel contains more references to historical events than the film.

Despite the limited depiction of the Civil Rights Movement and era in *The Help*, responses by black and white readers suggest that many are aware that Stockett is not attempting to tell the whole story and that, for some, her privileging of the domestic sphere may actually serve to increase interest in the larger history of

MISSING CALL FBI

THE FBI IS SEEKING INFORMATION CONCERNING THE DISAPPEARANCE AT PHILADELPHIA, MISSISSIPPI, OF THESE THREE INDIVIDUALS ON JUNE 21, 1964. EXTENSIVE INVESTIGATION IS BEING CONDUCTED TO LOCATE GOODMAN, CHANEY, AND SCHWERNER, WHO ARE DESCRIBED AS FOLLOWS:

ANDREW GOODMAN



JAMES EARL CHANEY



MICHAEL HENRY SCHWERNER

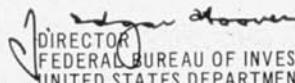


RACE: White
SEX: Male
DOB: November 23, 1943
POB: New York City
AGE: 20 years
HEIGHT: 5'10"
WEIGHT: 150 pounds
HAIR: Dark brown; wavy
EYES: Brown
TEETH:
SCARS AND MARKS:

Negro
Male
May 30, 1943
Meridian, Mississippi
21 years
5'7"
135 to 140 pounds
Black
Brown
Good: none missing
1 inch cut scar 2 inches above left ear.

White
Male
November 6, 1939
New York City
24 years
5'9" to 5'10"
170 to 180 pounds
Brown
Light blue
Pock mark center of forehead, slight scar on bridge of nose, appendectomy scar, broken leg scar.

SHOULD YOU HAVE OR IN THE FUTURE RECEIVE ANY INFORMATION CONCERNING THE WHEREABOUTS OF THESE INDIVIDUALS, YOU ARE REQUESTED TO NOTIFY ME OR THE NEAREST OFFICE OF THE FBI. TELEPHONE NUMBER IS LISTED BELOW.


DIRECTOR
FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE
WASHINGTON, D. C. 20535
TELEPHONE, NATIONAL 8-7117

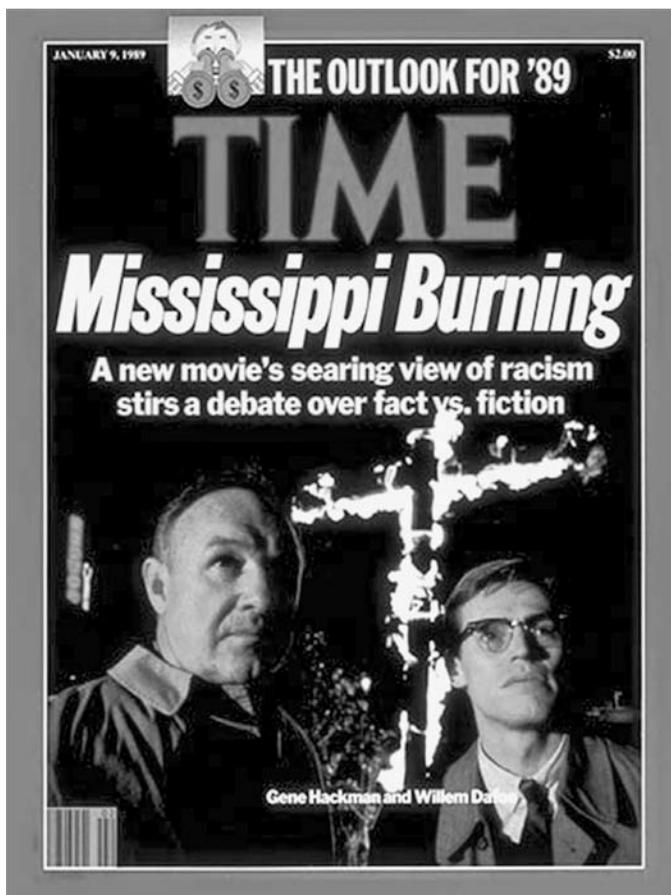
June 29, 1964

Judging The Help as "yet another entry to the Driving Miss Daisy genre of feel-good, simplistic examinations of topics that in truth are not easy, simple," one Amazon.com commenter goes on to say, "The solace I have, as I reflect on The Help, is that there WERE brave, noble white people who wanted to bring equality to the South: Andrew Goodman & Michael Schwerner." FBI poster, depicting Goodman, Chaney, and Schwerner, who went missing on June 21, 1964, in Philadelphia, Mississippi.

the Civil Rights Movement. In reacting to an Amazon.com post that only white racists like *The Help*, an African American viewer wrote, “I’m a Black woman, and I enjoyed this movie. It was lengthy and I wanted more. It was a slice of Southern life in the 60s. Certainly, totality wasn’t portrayed; instead, a slice.” A white viewer from Jackson, Mississippi, termed the film “a definite eye-opener to some of the behaviors in the South, besides the ones you learn about in history class.”¹⁰ Stockett punctuates *The Help* with references to Medgar Evers’s activism and his death, Rosa Parks, James Meredith, Martin Luther King and his March on Washington, northern whites’ movement work, sit-ins at the Woolworth’s lunch counter in Jackson, police dogs attacking black children in Birmingham, and the four black girls killed in the church bombing there. Although the KKK and White Citizens Council are not referenced directly, the actions they perpetrated are fictionalized in the beating and blinding of the black character Robert for using an unmarked “white” bathroom at the garden center, in the threat of black people who participate in the Movement losing their jobs or getting arrested or beaten, and in a brief reference to several maids’ stories about sexual harassment.

When I emailed members of a book club in Portland, Oregon, this question, “Do you read fiction with historical settings and context in order to learn history?,” a white woman who grew up in Virginia in the 1970s and 1980s, replied, “I do read historical fiction in some way to understand history. Maybe not learn the facts, but to put myself in the shoes of people who lived then.” Although my question made her wonder just how often she had made “assumptions” about history when reading popular historical fiction, she suggested, in a sympathetic nod to the detailed historical analysis of academics, that “pop culture is important to get more people thinking.” Another white reader, Joy Tompson, a member of a book club in Richmond, Virginia, gave a similar response, “I don’t read fiction in historical settings to learn ‘history’ but it certainly makes you think more about history and what was happening at the time.” While no doubt there are readers who do not make these fine distinctions, and historians are right to be concerned, the dramatic increase in sales of Susan Tucker’s *Telling Memories Among Southern Women* since *The Help* became a bestseller demonstrates that some readers were interested in learning more about history after experiencing *The Help*.¹¹

It is interesting to consider where literary critics stand on the representation of history in fiction. Do they approach *The Help* as the Association of Black Women Historians have? While literary critics surely hold Stockett accountable for historical inaccuracies, do they fault her for limiting her story to the domestic sphere? Posted on Quintard Taylor’s *Black Past* website, Trysh Travis’s essay “Is *The Help* Realistic? It Depends” takes up the narrative conventions of popular literature, which she points out is “a key weakness” in the Association of Black Women Historians’ “powerful argument.” Travis suggests that “the real question is not ‘is Stockett’s book ‘realistic’?’ but ‘Could any white-authored popular novel about



Much scholarly criticism has been heaped on Hollywood for choosing to make a white character the heroic savior of helpless black people. As Nkeiru Nzeagwu argues: "This strategy of presenting only the stories of good, sympathetic, upright white defenders of hapless Blacks enables Hollywood to mask the extraordinary courage, and the powerful human interest stories of black agency challenging a frightful, murderous system." Time magazine cover acknowledging the debate over fact and fiction in the film Mississippi Burning, January 9, 1989.

white women's relationships with black domestic workers seem "realistic" to both a mass market white audience and race conscious progressives?" She reminds her readers that "The popular novel (a 'good read' focused on a three-dimensional character 'you can relate to') developed during the 19th century alongside the new middle classes" and "focused on depicting interior (personal) rather than exterior (social) states of being." She reminds us that the novel as a genre has always had critics; in the nineteenth century it was often the clergy, who felt that "novel reading threatened the church." But Travis points out that "Progressive reformers and revolutionaries have long had a similar complaint, arguing that character-driven novels obscure the ways that forces like class, gender, and race structure the world. Far from representing 'reality,' they actually falsify the centrality and power of the individual. This focus on private personhood not only fails to challenge the social structures that truly organize our world, but also perpetuates them."¹²

Can literary conventions and literary history then help explain *The Help's* popularity? Travis thinks so, arguing that "The average white woman reader in the U.S. . . . finds Stockett's novel 'realistic' not only because it is the story of someone like her, but also because it is the story of an individual struggling to become a better

person . . . in a specific social location and invested in that location's idea of 'realism.'" Travis goes on to ask, "Can that novel also seem 'realistic' to people who inhabit a radically different social location? Or to put it more practically, are there any novels out there on this topic that both mainstream white readers of popular fiction and the ABWH and its supporters can find 'realistic'?" Travis singles out two novels by white writers, Ellen Douglas's *Can't Quit You, Baby* and Minrose Gwin's *The Queen of Palmyra* (2010). She gives Gwin's realistic novel high marks for its representation of the black perspective on the eleven-year-old white protagonist who has fled her abusive home to live with her grandparents' black maid; the black characters see her "as somewhat pathetic, and their relationship is animated by their awareness that her inappropriate dependence on them jeopardizes their whole community." And Travis praises Douglas's postmodern novel because it not only has a narrative form that signals the author's limited perspective, but "contains no promise of personal transformation, and certainly no suggestion that personal transformation can lead to social change."¹³

Travis's fascinating argument led me to more thoughts about readers' responses, both white and black. If, as some critics have argued, *The Help* discloses white nostalgia for black mammies, then comments like this one, with its problematic use of black dialect, from a reader in Atlanta suggest that, for some white readers, it does:

Rarely have I read a book that evoked such vivid memories of my childhood, wandering around for hours through the pages of "The Help" as though it was my own house. I remembered, not just with my mind, but with my entire body the warm smell of clean sweat, Windex, and starch emanating from the maid who raised me with her simple love and a mighty firm hand. Her ample lap, my cheek against her bosom, rocking, rocking, humming something that still evokes a primal wellbeing in me . . . I was a Mae Mobley, and I still remember Rosie's words cutting through the emptiness and chaos of my house: "You a sweet child, Miss Kaffy. Yassum, you just a mighty fine girl."

If, as some critics have suggested, *The Help* downplays the violence and terror of the Civil Rights Movement, then this comment by Elizabeth from San Antonio suggests that it does, "Don't be afraid to buy this book because you anticipate several hundred pages describing abuse and injustice. There are some disturbing reminders of our nation's history, but I thought this book was anything but depressing."¹⁴

But does *The Help* paradoxically perform other, less comfortable cultural work for mainstream white readers, even these two readers? Without fully explaining herself, one reader wrote, "I fell in love with the characters. I suffered through their hardships and celebrated their bravery and boldness . . . Being born and raised in the South, I felt as if I knew each character personally. The author, Kathryn Stockett, took me back to [a] place I had tucked away in my memory. Brings to



The Association of Black Women Historians posted a response to The Help on Amazon.com, which praised the performances of the African American actresses in the film, but drew attention to shortcomings in both the novel and the film, including the absence of “the reign of terror” perpetuated by the Ku Klux Klan and the White Citizens Council, but also of the black activists who responded. The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) marching in memory of black youngsters killed in Birmingham bombings, Washington, D.C., September 22, 1963, by Thomas J. O’Halloran, U.S. News & World Report Magazine Photograph Collection, Library of Congress.

mind all the sufferings black people faced. How young white women were judged by their status . . . This book, while completely enthralling me, taught me a lesson in life and moving on.” Another response from a reader in Boston emphasized the power of the novel’s message, “This book will change you and give you much to think about. After you read it, share it with another. This book is meant to be discussed over and over. It has a very important theme and message.”¹⁵ Such responses, which support Travis’s thesis about why white readers respond favorably to popular novels of personal transformation, seem important, even if they do not always lead the reader to activism.

Popular literature or movies can sometimes transform thinking even as they

offer up illusions. Afrikaner police officer Eric Taylor confessed to the unsolved killing and burning of four black activists in Craddock, South Africa, after he saw *Mississippi Burning*. Moved by the film, he was prompted to read Nelson Mandela's autobiography, which eventually led to his own appearance before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, where he publicly confessed and expressed remorse. While I have yet to hear of any 1960s White Citizens Council members coming forth to confess their crimes after seeing *The Help*, the Domestic Workers United in California is using *The Help* to lobby for a domestic workers' bill of rights. But it is interesting, and I think significant, how many white eyes have been opened by *The Help*—and how much white guilt confessed by those who wore blinders either during the 1960s or about that era. A viewer from North Carolina wrote, "The movie was full of funny moments, as well as deep and meaningful moments, that really made me think of how life was for African Americans. Not only that but it made me think about racism in general. Beyond this, I would also say that it's the kind of film that inspires you to stand for what is right." A viewer from Goodyear, Arizona, found the film's portrayal of discrimination "so shocking at times" that she "almost felt embarrassed to be watching it, ashamed of our country's history," but she admits being left with "an optimistic hope about the true goodness of most people and the ways in which wrongs are often eventually righted."¹⁶ Of course, such emotionally cleansing responses seem not to allow for a nuanced or realistic understanding of structural racism, making the solutions to problems involving race appear far too easy.

Works like *The Help* that reconfigure the conflict as one not so much between blacks and whites as between good and evil whites allow white readers and viewers to side with Skeeter, hate Hilly, and experience hopeful optimism about improved race relations and friendship across the color line as the maids collaborate with Skeeter to write *Help*. Patricia Turner, a professor of African American Studies, sees one of the film's major problems as positing "that bad people were racist," which "implies that good people were not." And yet, some readers like Naomi feel that Stockett embedded this point in the novel in her portrayal of Skeeter's ignorance and naiveté, "As a white reader, I felt called on the carpet, too, by the book, because although Hilly is villainized, Skeeter was the one I traveled through the book with. It challenged me to question myself. How many negative assumptions are so imbedded in me that I'm completely unaware of them? The thought terrifies me. I liked *The Help* because I felt like it captured that exact thing—that subtle I'm-a-good-person racism that allows the Hillys to flourish." Not all white readers have viewed Skeeter as the heroic savior as some academics have feared. Some see her, as Megan from Long Island does, as "rather flawed. Weak, even. She didn't have the balls to call her friends on their horrid behavior. For me, she was just the shoe in the door for Minnie and Abilieen." Others view Skeeter "as less of a person who was saving and more of a person who was being saved," with the result that

they do not see the novel as having only one protagonist: “I feel like the women who were cleaning the houses gave her the courage to find her own voice and in return she gave them a voice.”¹⁷

So I wonder if we have taken the full measure of *The Help*'s effect on privileged readers. A Pakistani American blogger, Faiqa Khan, whose family in Pakistan has domestic help, gained an understanding of the double victimization of racism:

All I know is that as I read that book I walked away from it understanding that discrimination does not only victimize the people who are on its receiving end. There is a price that your soul pays, I think, for believing that because someone is poor, black, whatever, that somehow they are unclean, untrustworthy or unable to take care of themselves. There is something very sad about observing people who have read many books, have been afforded so many opportunities and possess such goodness in their hearts as they lie to themselves about the fact that things are the way they are because this is the way they have always been . . . Books and movies are valuable for many reasons, and while I appreciate the criticisms of this book as valid identity-based positions, I am grateful for what the book taught me about my own.

A white reader who responded to Khan's blog post reminds us of a phenomenon that reader response theorists have explored; first-person narratives can produce alliances across identity lines: “I was rooting for the maids. And I was happy to see the white bigots get what's coming to them.” This same reader alludes to a white response that scholars have read as nostalgia for the mammy figure and naiveté about black life: “I also feel the scene with the little white girl at the end having more of a relationship with her black nanny than her own natural mother quite important to the whole.” Some readers and viewers, of both races, have termed *The Help* as much about gender as race, pointing not only to the degraded positions of the black women and the circumscribed lives of the white women but to “how mean spirited cliques are” and the troubled mother-daughter relationships. Stockett does not do justice to the complexity of her black maids' family lives, and she idealizes the relationships between Skeeter and Constantine and Mae Mobley and Aibileen. But the painful nostalgia that some white readers experience may not be as much for the time period when black women could only aspire to be maids and wait on them, as for the attention they received from these women in a family in which the relationship with their biological mother was problematic or non-existent. N. Gargano's response is typical of these readers:

I grew up in the South in the '60s and my whole neighborhood had housekeepers or “Help.” We had someone who worked for us, we called her Nursey, and she was my friend, and my caretaker. After my parents got divorced, she was my rock. This is way too personal, but my stepmother was a witch, and



Stockett punctuates The Help with references to Medgar Evers's activism and his death, Rosa Parks, James Meredith, Martin Luther King and his March on Washington, northern whites' movement work, sit-ins at the Woolworth's lunch counter in Jackson, police dogs attacking black children in Birmingham, and the four black girls killed in the church bombing there. "Emancipator looks down on demonstrators," March on Washington, August 28, 1963, by James K. Atherton, New York World-Telegram and the Sun Newspaper Photograph Collection, Library of Congress.

when I think what Nursey had to put up with to stay with me and my sisters, to help take care of us, I just don't know how to express it. She did not leave because of us kids. This book gave me so much to think about and brought up so many feelings, so many good, and so so many not so good.

Sadly, the Jim Crow South made black help more prevalent and cheaper than white help, and the need to work to put food on their own family tables forced black

women to put up with poor working conditions in order to keep their jobs, a fact that *The Help* has made many white readers aware of for the first time.¹⁸

So far scholars have been more interested in speculating about why so many white readers and viewers have loved *The Help* and why so many African Americans are or should be upset by it than about why the NAACP, some black readers and viewers, and domestic workers of all races and ethnicities have been drawn to the story. Given that responses to the film and the novel run into the thousands on a variety of websites, I have not read all of the positive reviews by African American readers, but I did notice that many are written by general readers with ties to Jackson, Mississippi, or to the South or domestic work, which suggests that their lived experience is closer to the world that Stockett's characters inhabit. In other words, they connect with details that make *The Help* "real" to them, just as Travis argued white readers do. An African American woman who lives in Texas posted:

There is only one other book so far that I've read within the past year that has had such a profound impact on me and that honor goes to Ms. Octavia E. Butler's book *Kindred*. *The Help* has just been added to the list. This novel was absolutely amazing! The author's descriptions of Jackson, Mississippi, the people and the times in which they lived during the 1960's are accurate. . . . I'm a 30-year-old black woman so I didn't grow up during that time so all I know is what my own family has told me. My husband was born and raised in Jackson, MS . . . so when I finished this book, I asked his mother about it and she stated that even though the story is fiction . . . Ms. Stockett hit the nail on its head and that she was right on about everything . . . It was nice to read about what actually might have happened versus reading what's in the history books. I loved the way Ms. Stockett incorporated some of the major events that happened during that era. She even got the vernacular of the people right, even though some of it was exaggerated! . . . Some of my husband's people still speak like that to this day.

A woman from Chicago, who grew up in Mississippi in the '60s, wrote:

I am a former Mississippian and very familiar with Jackson and the mentality of the times *The Help* is written in. The book is spot-on in both the telling of the maids' stories and the employers. However, I left the South when I was a small girl and came to the Chicago area and found that the situations were not too different in how the help was treated there either.

Janita from Atlanta uses her southern roots and family's history of domestic work both to validate the authenticity of *The Help* and to upbraid the novel's critics on both sides of the color line, "To the white critics who say the book tells lies about



Ada Peters Brown
aged 7 months - sep 3 days

how blacks were treated during this era and to my brothers and sisters who think it's racist for a white Southern woman to tell this story, I can tell you, first hand, the words on these pages are very, very real."¹⁹

The more one examines the reception of *The Help*, the less one is able to categorize the reception as divided between blacks and whites or academics and general readers or those who have worked as domestics and those who haven't. Psychological reader response theorist Norman Holland would not be surprised. He argues that when we read a book or watch a film, text and identity combine to create a "literary transaction": "a text does not 'force' a response (Derrida) or 'foresee' one (Eco) or 'constrain' one (Iser)." Rather, individual interpretations are produced not only by social categories like race, gender, and class, but by complex individual "identity themes"—temperament, personality, and patterns of early childhood relationship—and the variety of "codes and canons" that each individual uses to interpret a text. In a move that sounds Freudian, but which is based in cognitive science, Holland asserts that "any individual shapes the materials the literary work offers him—including its author—to give him what he characteristically both wishes and fears." He explains, "As readers, each of us will bring different kinds of external information to bear. Each will seek out the particular themes that concern him. Each will have different ways of making the text into an experience with a coherence and significance that satisfies." Thus, because we respond to a text individually, socially, and culturally, it is not surprising that the varied reception of *The Help* has not been as predictably divided along racial or regional or professional lines as pundits and even academics might expect. Nor is it surprising that a novel which addresses race relations during a time marked by racial violence and social upheaval, but which was published during a time some have prematurely termed "post-racial," has become one of the most talked about books and films of the twenty-first century. Nor is it surprising in a time of heightened focus on identity that some African American readers have prefaced their "love" for *The Help* with introspective comments about their responses, "I felt as an African American woman I was supposed to hate it."²⁰ Some progressive white academics have admitted *sotto voce* that they enjoyed the film or the novel "as entertainment," although hastened to add that they had many reservations about the form and content. That *The Help* has occasioned such strong feelings in so many

Opposite:

Some readers and viewers, of both races, have termed The Help as much about gender as race, and the painful nostalgia that some white readers experience may not be as much for the time period when black women could only aspire to be maids and wait on them, as for the attention they received from these women in a family in which the relationship with their biological mother was problematic or non-existent. Carte de visite depicting young nursemaid and child, Wenderoth, Taylor & Brown, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, ca. 1870, Gladstone Collection of African American Photographs, Library of Congress.

readers and that some readers feel they must preface their responses with disclaimers reveal as much about U.S. race relations in the early twenty-first century as about the complex literary transactions between individual readers and viewers and *The Help*.

NOTES

Typographical errors in reader comments on public forums have been corrected for readability. I would like to thank Chris Metress for his helpful comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

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