

Representing, Performing and Tracing the “Mammyscript”

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Sidan opphavet hennar i *the Antebellum South* og fram til rundt 1960-talet, har størsteparten av framstillingar av den kvinnelege Afro-Amerikanske *domestic worker* i Amerikansk litteratur representert henne som *the mammy*. Auka rettar for Afro-Amerikanarar gjennom Borgarrettigheitsrørsla gjorde at færre Afro-Amerikanarar gjekk inn i denne rolla, og the Immigration Act of 1965 gjorde endringar i innvandringspolitikk. Dette vart reflektert i litteratur og populærkultur, og figuren var ikkje lenger Afro-Amerikansk, men Latinamerikansk. I denne oppgåva tar eg for meg representasjonen av *the mammy stereotype/figure* som ein slags fantasi. Den har halde seg relativt uforandra sidan den vart forma, og eg argumenterer for at ein kan lokalisere den gjennom ulike ekko og spor i dagens litteratur om the Latina doméstica. I kapittel 1 greier eg ut om korleis mammyfiguren vart forma som eit symbol for ein fantasi, og korleis den dermed sjølv vart ein fantasi. Dette kan vi sjå gjennom å studere ei spesiell personifisering av mammyfiguren som enno vert brukt til å reklamere for the Quaker Oats Company sine produkt, nemleg “Aunt Jemima.” Vi ser at essensen til mammyfiguren er tilstade i historia til Aunt Jemima, mellom anna i det ein kallar *diacritical advertisement*, altså det å sentrere reklame rundt etniske og stereotypiske trekk som kan gje spesifikke assosiasjonar til produktet ein ynskjer å selje, samt innramming og iscenesetjing. Ho har i tillegg sett sine fotspor for seinare litterære portrett av mammyfiguren. I kapittel 2 ser eg på ein meir progressiv og nyansert representasjon av mammyportretta frå segregeringstida, nemleg karateren Delilah Johnston i Fannie Hurst sin roman *Imitation of Life* (1933). Her argumenterer eg for at ein gjennom ein *palimpsestisk* lesing av dette verket kan sjå at mammyfiguren, eller det eg kallar the “mammyscript,” kjem til overflata og tar kontroll over Delilah sin eigen presentasjon. I kapittel 3 er vi komne til dagens portrett av domestic workers, der eg lokaliserer ekkoa og spora av stereotypen, eller “*the mammyscript*,” i *My Hollywood* (2010) av Mona Simpson, *Living Out* (2005) av Lisa Loomer og *América’s Dream* (1997) av Esmeralda Santiago. Gjennom ulike tropar ser vi spor og repetisjonar av mammyfiguren. Framstillinga av arbeidsgjevarane til the Latina domésticas bidreg på si side med sterke forventningar, og iscenesetjingar og innrammingar som krev ei forestilling frå the doméstica som ein mammyliknande figur. Vi ser at mammyfiguren figurerer og vert gjenoppliva i desse bøkene gjennom ei forvikling, eit samansurium, av dei ulike laga i materialet eg jobbar med, og at the Latina doméstica og mammyfiguren konstituerer kvarandre *palimpsestuously*, altså i ein relasjon, eit samspel som eigentleg ikkje skal vere der.

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Introduction

“Mammy lives in the halo of a golden past – long past – of which *we* have only echoes and *they* ere long will be forgotten music” (G. Langhorne)

The above words were written by G. Langhorne in 1922, in the preface to her leaflet called *Mammy's Letters*. This small book contains letters written to her by her old slave Jerdena Jefferson, her own Mammy. In the preface, Langhorne expresses her dismay over the change that the Civil War brought upon the American society. Nevertheless, “in the little “house by the side of the road” where Mammy lives, time has stood still (Langhorne). And this is just what the leaflet of Jefferson’s letters reflects, as they recount and preserve small events and incidents of her life. A deep bond between Mammy and her “mistress” Langhorne comes across when reading Jefferson’s way of addressing her as “honey chile” and “dear” (Langhorne). However, *Mammy's Letters* are not all that its title communicates. Langhorne herself states in her preface that some of the “letters” are “incidents related by her [Mammy] that I have arranged in letter form.” In other words, Langhorne, in written form, re-presents and represents these “incidents.”

Here we encounter what I argue is descriptive for the literary mammy figure in the years ahead of, as well as those preceding, Langhorne’s leaflet, namely her configuration as a white representation. The mammy figure was constructed in the early 19th century by pro-slavery authors as the embodiment of an imagined, utopian society of a harmonized racial hierarchy (Clinton 201-2). Reading her in light of the historical changes that have happened since her origination, she now, herself, stands forth as a fantasy. From her fabrication, she quickly became a stock character in literature, and the perhaps clearest representative of the mammy from antebellum America can be found in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), more specifically in the character of Aunt Chloe. After the Civil War, the mammy figure continued to frequent literature, both in works of the period’s contemporary setting, such as the above-mentioned small leaflet by G. Langhorne, as well as in retrospective novels like Margaret

Mitchell's 1936 classic, *Gone with the Wind*. Of course, one character from Mitchell's work is particularly interesting, namely Mammy. This large, vocal and faithful servant character, whose name implies neither more nor less than her characteristic, is a very clear representative of the mammy stereotype. The mammy figure was also a well-known character in popular culture, and made appearances on the radio as well as in various TV-shows and films. Despite the course of time, she preserved her stereotypical features.

However, some time in the 1960s, she disappeared from literature and popular culture¹, except from a few occasional appearances, before she suddenly reappeared in 2009, in two of the characters in Kathryn Stockett's novel *The Help*. From the 1960s and until the present day, with the exception of Stockett's novel, the literary representation of the mammy's legacy – her history and framings – would reappear the Latina nanny: the *doméstica*. In this thesis, then, I shall argue that mammy figure persists in literature as a fabrication and representation of, to use the words of Langhorne, a “golden past” – a fantasized past.

It seems that the figure of the *doméstica* has become as much a matter of course in today's popular culture as the mammy was in that and literature during her heyday. Contemporary literature on the *doméstica* is also starting to appear, and we must therefore be aware of the extent of the function of the mammy stereotype as a foundation for the representation of the *doméstica*. The mammy stereotype is today a subject for different readings and interpretations. On the one hand, she stands forth as the figure she was constructed as, namely a symbol of racial harmony and hierarchy. In Kimberly Wallace-Sanders's book *Mammy: A Century of Race, Gender, and Southern Memory* we find an extensive exploration of the various variants of the mammy stereotype's figurations and traits, and her work will be

¹ We do find the mammy figure in a few literary works during the 1970s as well, such as in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), where the character of Pauline functions as a mammy figure for a white family. However, this novel differs from what I shall explore in this thesis, as it actively criticises societal structures and ideologies, by the use of, among others, the mammy stereotype. See Jennifer Gillan for a thorough and informative reading of Pauline as a mammy figure.

used as source for the history of the literary mammy. On the other hand, and this is where my own reading takes a different turn than that of Wallace-Sanders, the mammy figure is a fantasy that visualizes an interplay of layers - layers of history, aesthetics, culture and societal structures, into what we call the *palimpsest*, which can tell us a great deal about the past and the present. And most peculiarly, she is of interest today because she still sets her imprint on the contemporary relationship between the domestic worker and her employer, illuminating how racial hierarchy is still very much alive.

The search for the mammy figure in contemporary literature on the domestic worker, or what I shall call *Domestic literature*², is a relatively new area of research, and remains, to my knowledge, largely undiscovered. In the field of sociology, the relationship between the contemporary domestic worker and her employer has been examined as a parallel to that of the mid-20th century, between African American domestic and *her* employer, among others by Mary Romero. In October of 2014 I attended a sociology conference titled “Justice in the Home: Domestic Work Past, Present & Future,” held at the Barnard Center for Research on Women at Columbia University. The conference focused on domestic workers’ conditions, and in particular their lack of legislated rights in their working environments. For the United States’ illegal immigrants, who cross the border to seek safety from various violent, threatening and traumatic situations in their home countries, the lack of rights is two-sided. These immigrants often start working as domestics precisely *because* of the lack of legislated rights, and subsequently their employers do not always require seeing their documentation. Such working conditions often strengthen the already foundational imbalanced relationship between domestic and employer as result of race issues. It is disturbing to see how popular culture representations

² I have attempted to find out which genre fictional literature on contemporary domestic workers may belong to, and feel that there is a gap here. The literary works I have come across reflect a particular situation of power, gender and ethnicity, and do not fit into the traditional domestic or sentimental genres. I therefore suggest *Domestic literature* as a tentative name for this literature.

of the *doméstica* displays the Latinas almost exclusively as stereotypes, and hence do not contribute to the recognition of inequality between domestic and employer. In the very few contemporary literary works on the domestic worker, we find that this imbalance is very much thematised. The foundational but highly ambivalent power balance between different ethnicities found in antebellum and segregation era representations of the mammy figure finds its continuation in contemporary literature on the *doméstica*. This thesis can hopefully make a contribution to the literary study of this field by illuminating this continuation.

The overarching perspective of this thesis's exploration of the mammy figure is that of representation. More specifically, I argue that the representation of the mammy figure functions as the representation, or the symbol, of a *fantasy*. Several of the *Oxford English Dictionary's* definitions of the word "fantasy" are helpful, and can be used to describe the fantasy of the mammy figure in particular, as well as its function in literature. Those definitions relevant to the focus of this thesis explain the word fantasy as an "[i]magination; the process or the faculty of forming mental representations of things not actually present," "[a] day-dream arising from conscious or unconscious wishes or attitudes," and "[a] product of imagination, fiction, figment." The OED also tells us that in psychology, the term "fantasy" is often defined as a "[m]ental apprehension of an object of perception; the faculty by which this is performed." These definitions are interesting to us because they cover all the aspects of the fantasy of the mammy figure, and meet in what I shall focus on in this thesis, namely her origination, her development, the actual stereotype and the performance that the stereotype entails. In order to cover all of these aspects, it is important to find a coherent frame that functions as a groundwork for the later exploration of the *doméstica* as an heiress to the mammy figure. One very famous embodiment of the mammy figure used in the field of advertising, is especially useful, namely Aunt Jemima. In the following, we shall trace her footsteps.

M.M. Manring tells the tale of Aunt Jemima very informatively in his book *Slave in a Box: The Strange Career of Aunt Jemima*, and this work will be used as a primary source for my account of the story of this particular mammy figure. The Aunt Jemima product line of pancake mix, syrup and other household merchandise, is today owned by the Quaker Oats Company, but started out as a very small business in 1889. The story of this character is filled with elements that are very telling for how the mammy figure resumes her figure in contemporary literature, and one of them is the visualization of her characteristics in advertisements. The way the advertisement images were, and still are, used, as *diacritical advertisement* for the products, is interesting. In his article, Robert L. Craig states that diacritical advertisement is a way of “connecting the ideology of consumerism with ethnicity,” and subsequently making advertising “a discourse about ethnicity” (“Designing” 34). What Craig calls “symbolic diacritica,” or “overt signals of identity,” often function “as recognizable signs for readers” and label the product with the value that its advertisement represents (34). The various advertisement images of Aunt Jemima clearly illustrate “overt signals of ethnicity,” not just in regards to her African American “race,” but also of her function and status as a mammy figure. In other words, the images illustrate, literally, who, and what, the mammy figure is.

In the Aunt Jemima story, we encounter the aspect of performance. The Aunt Jemima character was performed by a number of actresses, all of whom entered the role by acquiring several of her stereotypical mammy features. But what also characterizes this element of the literary mammy figure, exemplified by Aunt Jemima, is her white superiors’ way of framing and staging her into the role. One very dramatic example of this is how Nancy Green, who was the first and one of the most famous actresses of the Aunt Jemima role, several years after her death was still referred to as Aunt Jemima in newspapers instead of her own name (Manring *Slave* 78). This representation was also visible in the use of her images, as her face was remained on the front of the Aunt Jemima products several years after she died. This brings us to the final

element that I would like to focus the exploration of the mammy figure around, namely the power of her travelling image.

W.J.T. Mitchell, in his book *What do Pictures Want? The lives and Loves of Images*, explores “the agency, motivation, autonomy, aura, fecundity, or other symptoms that make pictures into “vital signs,” (...) not merely signs *for* living things but signs *as* living things” (6). This understanding of images “*as* living things” is interesting in relation to Mieke Bal’s theory and thoughts on concepts, for example as images, that travel. Bal states that “concepts are not fixed. They travel – between disciplines, (...) [and] between historical periods (...). Between disciplines, their meaning, reach, and operational value differ. These processes of differing need to be assessed before, during, and after each ‘trip’” (24). In chapter 1 we shall see and “assess” how Aunt Jemima’s image as a mammy figure travels, where she travels, take the road with her if you will, to cover the period from her origination in the early 19th century and to the 1930s.

The mammy’s image travels through time and between meanings. On its journey are added layers that contribute to the fabric of the figure we have at hand today. Two of Aunt Jemima’s images are especially enlightening: she goes from being displayed with her very stereotypical mammy traits such as black skin and a colourful bandanna, to having her skin “lightened” and having her bandanna removed. Comparing these two images, we see that the half a decade long time gap sets its imprints on the representation of Aunt Jemima. These imprints tell us a great deal about time and historical changes. The current figure at the front of the products reminds us more about the typical domestic worker of today, namely the Latina nanny. However, the images also tell us that their role is important; they are able to reclaim their importance, their presence, their lives – they are able to survive – despite historical changes. But before we reach the destination of the Latina nanny in the exploration of the literary representation of the domestic worker, we must travel with the image into literature and

find out how the mammy figure is represented in the segregation era America, and in what way her image survives.

About understanding images, W.J.T. Mitchell states that “[i]t’s not just a question of their producing “imitations of life” (as the saying goes), but that the imitations seem to take on “lives of their own” (2). Interestingly, this goes very well with the novel in focus for chapter 2, which is titled *Imitation of Life*, and where the portrayal of the mammy figure is attempted being given a new meaning. *Imitation of Life* was written in 1933 by Fannie Hurst, a very famous and quite liberal author during her time. The two protagonists of the novel, the white Bea Pullman and her African American maid and mammy figure Delilah Johnston, are more equal than most domestic employer – employee relationships at the time. The two become business partners, selling and produce baked goods, they are close friends, and their daughters grow up together. Compared to Hurst’s fellow authors’ portrayals of the mammy figure, such as that of Margaret Mitchell’s “Mammy,” we see that the fabric of the fantasy has received new imprints in the shape of a more progressive and nuanced depiction of Delilah as a mammy. The absolute strongest implication of this is Delilah’s way of visualizing and illustrating the fact that she acts in the role of a mammy instead of being one by “nature.” One may say that Delilah *imitates* the mammy figure by her performance, and that she thus attempts to “take on a life of her own.”

Regardless of her progressive portrayal, Delilah is a mammy figure. This is especially visible in the way Bea uses her as a diacritical advertisement, more specifically as a front figure for the business. Not only does this echo the Aunt Jemima figure, it also evokes her story. I shall argue that Bea’s recreation of the Aunt Jemima “universe” is a construction of a *dreamscape*. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines the word “scape” as “forming nouns denoting a view, picture, or (literal or figurative) landscape of a type specified by the first element.” I will suggest the word *dreamscape* as such a composition. While the OED includes

several definitions of this word, they do not quite coincide with what I argue is Bea's *construction*. Chiara Brambilla's use of the word "scape" in a more "active" sense in relation to borderscapes is interesting, as she refers to a meaning of the word in the "sense of creative work – "shaping and carving"" (Cowen et al.). In a sense this is what Bea does in her creation of an imagined universe, a landscape, where different props constantly work to evoke the understanding of Delilah as a mammy figure, and which functions as a scene that facilitates Delilah's performance.

As may be clear to the reader, we are in Hurst's novel dealing with a portrayal of Delilah which, in my reading, does not univocally present her as a mammy figure in the same way as several other portraits from Hurst's time. Rather, we are dealing with a fabric, a material, which operates on several levels, and which constitutes several layers. In other words, I read *Imitation of Life* as a *palimpsest*. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines the palimpsest as a "multilayered record." During the 7th to the 15th century, recycling of vellum or parchments was common due to little, or lack of, writing material (Dillon "Reinscribing" 244.) The text written on the vellum was erased by different chemical approaches, and the vellum turned blank and could again be written on (244). However, sometimes a chemical reaction between the air and the iron in the erased ink would make the layer of the old text reappear in very weak traces (244). The result was a *palimpsest*: "an involuted phenomenon where otherwise unrelated texts are involved entangled, intricately interwoven, interrupting and inhabiting each other" (245). Hurst's novel can be read as an attempt to erase the one-sided, stereotypic portrayal of African American domestic workers as mummies, by overlaying it with her seemingly nuanced portrayal. But what is dramatic about the palimpsest, is the risk of the "reappearance of the underlying script," and as such, "nothing can properly and truly 'die'" (246).

The notion of adding layers, imprints and impressions is indeed present in my exploration of the Aunt Jemima figure in chapter 1, but in the analysis in chapter 2 we shall

find that the case is more intricate. Several scholars and critics have shared their readings on whether or not Delilah is portrayed as the mammy stereotype. Sterling Brown in 1935 read Hurst's novel and the 1934 film adaptation as a perpetuation of the "old stereotype of the contented Mammy" (88, qtd. in Caputi 701), and this has since been supported by among others Lauren Berlant, Monique Rooney and Daniel Itzkovitz in their various readings. Donald Bogle, on the other hand, reads the 1934 film adaptation as a suggestion that the view on race in American may not be as improved and advanced as people would like to think (Turner Classic Movies). My reading differs from these by reading according to the palimpsest, focusing on Hurst's novel as an attempt to overlay the stereotype with her liberal and more nuanced mammy portrayal. This may help resolve the dilemma of which representation is the strongest: that of the mammy stereotype, or Delilah's own attempt to resist being staged into this role?

Central to this chapter is the function of the fantasy. Psychoanalysts Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok's definition of the fantasy is:

all those representations, beliefs, or bodily states that gravitate toward the opposite effect, that is, the preservation of the status quo. This definition does not address the contents or the formal characteristics of fantasy, only its function, a preventive and conservative function. (...) [T]hey [the fantasies] refer to a *secretly perpetuated* topography. Understanding a fantasy entails the identification of the specific topographical change the given fantasy is called upon to resist. Consequently, the primal fantasy would itself represent appropriate measures to keep the original topography intact in the face of danger. (125-6)

Abraham and Torok are, as mentioned, psychoanalysts, and their definition and understanding of the fantasy is based on their analysis of, and competence in, the process of mourning. As such, the rest of their analysis – the way in which they use their definition and the examples

they bring forth – is not directly relevant to my analyses of the fantasy of the mammy figure. What is relevant, however, is the “preventive and conservative function” of the fantasy, which can be applied to the representation of the mammy figure in Hurst’s novel. Although her figure has been attempted overlaid, the “underlying script” (Dillon “Reinscribing” 245) of the fantasy, or what I call the “mammyscript,” is still present and will appear through “ghostly traces” (244).

Chapter 3 moves the focus from literature including African American domestic workers, to literature on the group that forms the majority of domestic workers in the U.S. today, namely Latinas. What is interesting about what I call Doméstic literature is that it is still a relatively new field. Of the few works that do exist, however, we shall explore *My Hollywood* (2010) by Mona Simpson, *Living Out* (2005) by Lisa Loomer and *América’s Dream* (1997) by Esmeralda Santiago, and see how the echoes and shadows of the mammy figure still reverberate. But before locating similarities between these different layers of the fabric which today constitutes the fantasy of the mammy figure, it is important to emphasize clearly their differences. The doméstica is *not* the mammy. The two figures do not share the same history or background, and the representation of the mammy stereotype has its own very different, dark and oppressive meaning and symbolism both in aesthetics and in the cultural sphere.

The two figures meet, however, on what becomes the *site* of the fantasy. Expectations to their role, and performance of this role, have certain features in common. Cathy Turner’s (373-74) thoughts on “site-specific performance” are useful here. Turner’s ideas on the “host and the ghost” can be used as a way to understand the fantasy as no longer necessarily the actual figure of the mammy. Rather, we must open our eyes to the expansion of the fantasy into a “scape,” a site, a host for ideas, imprints and impulses. As a host, it contains traces of its previous occupants, performances and “ghosts,” and we can therefore read the site or the host as a palimpsest.

But where we in chapter 2 are able to use a “palimpsest reading,” the imprints of the doméstica on the site of ideas must be taken into consideration. A “[t]raditional palimpsest reading has as its sole aim and objective the resurrection of the underlying script; the overlying one is irrelevant” (Dillon “Reinscribing” 253). Such a reading of contemporary literature on the domestic worker would, then, mean ignoring the most recent layers, imprints, and impulses. For the fabric we have at hand consists of an entanglement of layers which cannot be separated or isolated from each other, but must be preserved and read as what it produces. It is the actual palimpsest we must read: the fabric “in which several figures and several meanings are merged and entangled together, all present together at all times, and which can only be deciphered together, in their inextricable totality” (Genette 226, qtd. in Dillon *The Palimpsest* 5). A “palimpsestuous reading[, then,] is an inventive process of creating relations where there may, or should, be none; hence the appropriateness of its epithet’s phonetic similarity to the incestuous” (Dillon “Reinscribing” 254).

When the two figures of the mammy and the doméstica meet on the site of the fantasy, we see several relations between them. Such relations can be captured by Dillon’s elaboration on the word “[p]alimpsestuousness’ – a simultaneous relation of intimacy and separation” which preserves “the distinctness of its texts, while at the same time allowing for their essential contamination and interdependence” (Dillon *The Palimpsest* 3). And disturbingly, we shall find that the two figures’ relations and similarities tell us a great deal about how the tradition of domestic work functions today as a mirror of conditions of the mid-20th century.

As the reader will have gathered from these introductory pages, I wish to raise an awareness of the fact that the mammy may not be as absent from contemporary literature as one may think. In her small leaflet, Langhorne writes: “Mother, Home and Mammy! They are three of the most beautiful words in the English language and the latter is now almost obsolete.” I wish to invite the reader to keep these words in mind when reading the following chapters.

1. Originating the Fantasy: the Travelling Image of the Mammy Figure

1.1. Constructing Mammy: A White Portrayal of the Past

The present day evocation of the image of the mammy starts on the average American family's kitchen counter. Few reflect on the meaning of the image placed on the front of a syrup bottle or a box of pancake mix, but they are in fact contributing to keeping alive a surviving image of the stereotypical mammy character. The woman on the bottle is Aunt Jemima, evoking the classical, faithful, old Southern house slave "mammy." "Aunt Jemima's Syrup," "Aunt Jemima's Pancake Mix" and several other products in many ways tell the past and present history of race in America. The image on this series of products, for which the Quaker Oats Company is famous, has its roots in a 19th century mind set around race, and is a prime example of how concepts and images travel. These images tend to follow us, and as Øyvind Vågnes states, they become embedded in our lives:

The images that become "durable" – those that travel – are not merely records of what happened, but are also agents in the sense that they shape cultural and, inevitably, human memory of events. Addressing the shaping of memory in the present moment, then, means analysing how these images travel, how they are made to appear, how they shape new museological practices and a contemporary poetics of remembrance (148-9)

Sometimes the symbolism of an image develops and changes over time; other times it is accepted as part of the past. The traveling image of the mammy – from myth to stereotype, through reactions and alterations – belongs to the tradition and culture of diacritical racial representation. In the following I want to outline the history of the concept, or image, of the mammy – through the history and *actual* images of Aunt Jemima.

It was Chris Rutt who placed Aunt Jemima on the front of the boxes of pancake mix in 1890, and the glossy story of “Aunt Jemima” in many ways sums up how extraordinary *white* this concept really is. The truth, which M.M. Manring so accurately points out in his retelling of the Aunt Jemima story, is that she, in her early career, “was a white man” (*Slave* 70). In 1889 in St. Joseph, Missouri, Rutt was the owner of a recipe of a new kind of self-rising pancake flour and a flour mill. He did not, however, have any vision of how to advertise his product. One autumn day, the story goes, he came across one of the many “blackface minstrel shows” (61). Important about these sorts of minstrel shows is that they included a portrayal of the old-time Southern house slave, mammy. When the mammy, played by a white male with his face painted black with burned cork, wearing a dress with an apron, and a bandanna on his head, performed a song about his character, “Old Aunt Jemima,” Rutt made up his mind: “Here was the image [he] sought! Here was southern hospitality personified” (Marquette 143, qtd. in Manring *Slave* 61).

What Rutt saw that day, was a white, postbellum depiction of the mammy. Often known by people as a stereotypical, black, large woman with very few feminine traits but a strong maternal side, the mammy was a popular character in 19th and 20th century literature. In real life, as well as in literature, the name “mammy” was given to enslaved women nursing children (Jo-Ann Morgan 89). The maternal aspect is important here, as the etymology of the word *mammy* is by the *Dictionary of American Regional English* traced to a mix of the words *ma’am* and *mamma*. These roots of the word point to the position the mammy held in the household: she was a maternal, important and loved figure. Some mammies were called “Aunt,” which was a term of endearment, usually given to slave women who had been with the family for a long period of time” (Morgan 89). One example is “Aunt Chloe” in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), who functions as the mammy in the book. As we also see in Beecher Stowe, as well as in other works of literature, male slaves were often called “Uncle.” The titles

of “Aunt” or “Uncle” deprived the person in question of any sort of “normal” relationship association such as being married – a connotation more likely to be made by the use of the title “Mrs.” or “Mr.” (Morgan 97). The deliberate omission of the latter titles also underlines how the status of the “Aunts” and “Uncles” was not equal to that of their masters.

It is, however, important to make a note on the real-life mammy. According to Catherine Clinton (201-2), records do reveal that female slaves were sometimes placed in the house. However, Patricia Turner confirms that such cases were rare, since their white owners usually could not afford not to utilize them in the fields (44, qtd. in Pilgrim “The Mammy Caricature”). These house slaves, she claims, were often of mixed race (44). In fact, “[n]ot until after Emancipation did black women run white households or occupy in any significant number the special positions ascribed to them in folklore and fiction” (Clinton 201-2, qtd. in Pilgrim “The Mammy Caricature”). Clinton confirms that the mammy we meet in literature was a myth created by pro-slavery Southerners in order to justify the institution of slavery as a benign and empathic one, and by portraying her as masculine and desexualised, invalidate the claim from the North that white men would take sexual advantage of slave women (201-2). Hence, it is interesting that such a rare character in the real, antebellum plantation household should have such a massive presence in literature and culture from the end of the Civil War and up until as recently as the 1960s, as we will see in the following chapters. Nonetheless, this points to the fact that the mammy is constructed as the embodiment and the symbol of a fantasized past, or “[a] day-dream arising from conscious (...) wishes or attitudes” (*Oxford English Dictionary*). Subsequently, the mammy figure becomes herself a fantasy, or a “product of [that] imagination” or fantasy (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

Although the mammy has been depicted in various ways, the portrayal is, according to Kimberly Wallace-Sanders (13), especially marked by Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), a bestseller which signals the division between the early and the late portrayal of

mammy. Let us start with the early depictions, which are very thoroughly outlined and analysed in Wallace-Sanders's book on the mammy figure. Starting in the early 19th century, these portrayals functioned as the author's demonstration of racial hierarchy as harmonic and benevolent. Wallace-Sanders's (16-28) analysis of Granny Mott in George Tucker's *The Valley of Shenandoah* (1824) is interesting here. Granny Mott is of mixed race; most likely her mother was made pregnant by her white owner and thus, Granny Mott is the half-sister of her white superiors – a phenomenon quite common on the Southern plantation. The bodies of biracial mummies are generally described in a different manner than those of the black mummies, since the former were “marked by racial impurity” (17). Granny Mott's role as the “perfect mammy” becomes the foundation from which future mummies are shaped: her love for “her white children” is greater than her love for her own.

Wallace-Sanders's analysis (18-20) of Isabel Drysdale's character of “Aunt Chloe” in *Scenes in Georgia* (1827) enlightens the reader of the extravagant affection that the mammy had for “her” white children. The “superior” and “supernatural” love and bond between this mammy and her “white child” cannot be compared to the bond between mammy and her own children. The narrator describes the mammy's love for her white children as almost supernatural: “It seems even to exceed the force of natural affection for her own offspring, combining strong maternal love with the enthusiastic devotedness of loyalty” (Drysdale 37, qtd. in Wallace-Sanders 18). The novel also informs us of the reason for this “superior” love: “She considers her master's child as a superior being, and receives, with overflowing gratitude, the fond endearments of infantine affection” (Drysdale 37). Wallace-Sanders shows that by emphasizing the mammy's love for her white children the political agenda of keeping slaves in “their place” is made clear. The mammy's inferior status is certified by the fact that she cares more for her white children than her biological ones: the mammy's “biological (black) children function only to reaffirm her attachment to her surrogate (white) children,” whom she

“naturally” favours due to their racial superiority (Wallace-Sanders 19). Thus, through both Granny Mott and Aunt Chloe, the mammy’s sense of motherhood is portrayed with a sense of duality: her affection for her own children is crude and simple compared to the love she feels for her white children, which is extraordinary and phenomenal (19).

As Wallace-Sanders states, Beecher Stowe’s novel marked the start of the later portrayals of the mammy figure. When Beecher Stowe’s novel was published in 1852, it offered a depiction of slavery in general which was more nuanced than anything previously written. This is especially clear in her portrayal of some of the white slave-owners. The character of Marie St. Claire acts demeaning and prejudiced against all blacks. Such a portrayal of slave owners evoked strong reactions, since people of the antebellum South liked to represent themselves as a society of respectability and uprightness in their institution of slavery³. Wallace-Sanders (24) informs us that the novel’s depiction of the mammy figure does, despite its nuanced portrayal of slave owners, function as an embodiment of all the features that marked the mammy character prior to the novel’s publication. In short, the novel portrayed her as what we now see as the mammy stereotype. While Wallace-Sanders does not identify the particularities of the stereotype, we see that, for instance, the novel’s mammy figure of Aunt Chloe is described with a “round, black, shiny face (...) so glossy as to suggest the idea that she might have been washed over with the whites of eggs, like one of her own tea rusks. Her whole plump countenance beams with satisfaction and contentment from under a well-starched checkered turban” (Stowe 31). This excerpt from the novel portrays Aunt Chloe in as little flattering light as possible, and we shall see that it coincides with the post-bellum portrayal of the mammy figure, and how we know her today as a stereotype.

³ A series of “anti-Tom” novels was published by Beecher Stowe’s opponents, all of which desperately attempted to depict the institution of slavery as one of benevolence. See for example William L.G. Smith’s *Life at the South; or “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” as It is: Being Narratives, Scenes, and Incidents in the Real “Life of the Lowly”* (1852) and Ms. V.G. Cowdin’s *Ellen; or, the Fanatic’s Daughter* (1860).

For after the Civil War, the mammy continued to be shaped by Southern, nostalgic, pro-slavery authors, and thus with a certain political agenda. Manring summarizes the mammy's qualities and concludes:

[Mammy] was depicted as genuinely loving her masters and mistresses, thus providing a justification for slavery. She was sometimes remembered as a maid-of-all-work, someone who not only cooked in hot, detached southern kitchens, keeping a fire burning steadily all day, but also served as a nursemaid, physician and counsellor (*Slave* 8)

Even if the mammy often was the family therapist and psychologist, her position in the household was subservient due to her skin colour. This was reflected in the portrayal of her features, such as being disturbingly obese, and having an extremely dark skin colour – both markers of her inferiority according to the period's ideals. With almost masculine exterior qualities, the mammy was tall and had very broad shoulders. Her dialect was typically a Southern Black vernacular. Finally, like the early mammy, the postbellum one executed total control over her “white children,” while her own children were often depicted as filthy and rude (Wallace-Sanders 6). All of these features together constitute a stereotype of the mammy figure.

With these early images of the mammy in mind, we can now return to Chris Rutt. The encounter he had with the minstrel shows that autumn day in 1889 most likely provided him with the experience of the imitation of African American women, more specifically the mammy, performed by white actors. Minstrel shows were highly popular from as early as 1844 (Morgan 90), and Wallace-Sanders points out that they had a unique offer for the northerners: “the southern antebellum experience of having a mammy, without actually participating in slavery” (4). After the Civil War, the popularity of these shows decreased, but some places they continued as late as a few years after World War II (Manring *Slave* 66).

While slavery and the legal ownership of African Americans were over, minstrel shows interestingly enabled whites to continue to take possession over the representation of blacks. The complexity of the white men dressing up, “not only in blackface but in drag” (Manring *Slave* 61) is remarkable. Although the white actors positioned themselves as superior to both slaves and women, they nonetheless “reduced” their status to both upon entering the blackface, female role. For the aspect of the blackface part of the role, the explanation for why they would reduce themselves to this “inferior” position seems to lie in the exaggerated social distance between white and black. The actors of the minstrel shows generally displayed African Americans in a derogatory manner. One example is the character of Jim Crow, the country boy with a characteristic walk and the person after whom the segregation period is named, and his cousin Zip Coon, an inbred city boy (*Slave* 66). Their skin colour was always depicted as the reason for their inferiority, especially marked by stupidity and lack of basic human qualities such as rationality and intelligence. The exaggeration is so ludicrous that the distance between white and black, between representing and represented, must “naturally” be immense and even unbridgeable. As Manring states, the act “was really an act of creating whiteness, reminding white audiences that regardless of whatever trials they faced at work or home, they were uplifted by their race” (*Slave* 66). Seeing as whites had virtually “nothing” in common with the caricature, the reduced position the actors placed themselves in was thus confirmed as a role-play, and subsequently accepted.

And yet, the mammy had a slightly different role in these portrayals. The mammy belonged to the inferior category of African Americans, often portrayed as less intelligent and silly; however, she was also both known in literature, and portrayed in the minstrel shows, as a devoted caretaker with a strong bond to her surrogate children. By evoking the nostalgic memory of antebellum times, the actors acknowledged that these “simple-minded” creatures were a significant part of creating the Southerners’ identity. Consequently, while “reducing”

themselves to the inferior status of their human property, the white men also acknowledged the importance of the mammy's existence.

It was in the image of the mammy as caretaker, nanny, and a great cook that Rutt found the perfect advertisement for his pancake mix. However, as Manring (*Slave 74-77*) states in his account of the events leading to the product's success, neither Rutt nor his partner, Charles Underwood, had money for the promotion. After having advertised their pancake mix with a rather unflattering image of Aunt Jemima, and without good sales, the partners decided it was time to give up. Underwood was employed by the R.T. Davis Milling Company, and in 1890, R.T. Davis purchased Rutt and Underwood's business and recipe. From Rutt's idea of Aunt Jemima as a means of advertisement, Davis decided to bring Aunt Jemima to life. He sent out scouts to search for the perfect "personification of Aunt Jemima: a black woman with an outgoing personality, cooking skills, and the poise to demonstrate the pancake mix at fairs and festivals" (74). The winner proved to be Charles Jackson, who encountered the very first "Aunt Jemima" in Chicago in 1893. The loser on the other hand, for reasons which will soon be clear, was Nancy Green. She was a 59-year old free woman, originally born into slavery on a plantation in Montgomery County, Kentucky. When Jackson found her, she was working as a cook for a judge in Chicago. Green's face was placed on the front of the R. T. Davis Milling Company's version of the pancake mix boxes, and thus she became the personification of Aunt Jemima (*Slave 74-77*).

Green's first performance as Aunt Jemima took place at the "World's Fair: Columbian Exposition" in Chicago in 1893, and was followed by a number of others throughout her lifetime career as Aunt Jemima. According to Morgan, Arthur Marquette (142-54) recounts Aunt Jemima's first act, which turned out to be quite the fascination:

In a display erected as a large barrel, former slave Green, dressed as Aunt Jemima in full skirts and bright colors, cooked pancakes and entertained

fairgoers with tales of her life in the South. She was such a crowd-pleaser that according to the company, over fifty thousand orders for pancake flour were taken (qtd. in Morgan 88)

Green's performance was clearly founded on the stereotypical mammy whom people knew through shows and literature, rather than a historical house slave. According to Wallace-Sanders's explanation of the typical traits that mammy held, bright-coloured clothes were quite archetypal (6). Manring comments that the stories she told from her time in the South may have been an investment in the credibility and authenticity of Aunt Jemima as "a real ex-slave" (*Slave* 75).

Green's performances as Aunt Jemima add new layers to Manring's statement that Aunt

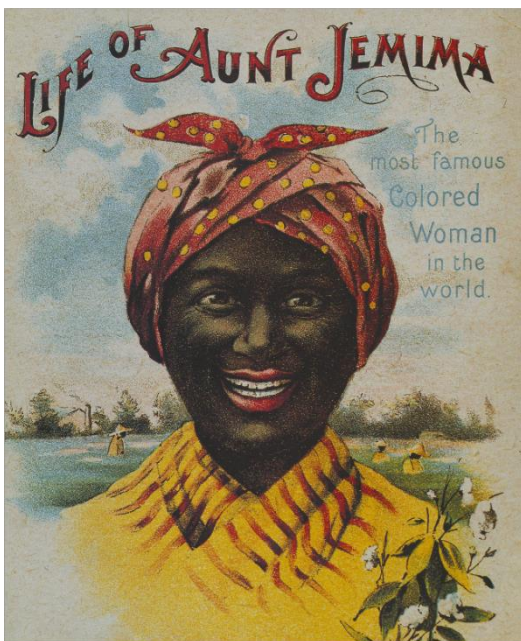


Fig. 1. Purd Wright *Life of Aunt Jemima, the Most Famous Colored Woman in the World* Hillsdale, Michigan: Lynn Burkett Collection, 1895. Print. 1895.

Jemima's "early career was a white man" (*Slave* 70).

We shall see that throughout her entire career, there are certain aspects that point to the fact that she is illustrated from a white point of view more often than any actual African American placed in this role is given the chance to represent herself. Green played Aunt Jemima with instructions from her white employers throughout her life, and consistently, and to this day, she is framed into the

stereotypical *image* of the mammy, based on a fantasy. As we will see in the following, this image has been staged in various ways.

One interesting example of this is Purd Wright's *The Life of Aunt Jemima, the Most Famous Colored Woman in the World* (1895, fig. 1). The pamphlet contained a mixture of factual and fictional events from the life of Aunt Jemima; they were "Nancy Green's slave

stories with Wright's imagination" (Manring *Slave* 76). Green's home state of Kentucky was replaced by Louisiana, and she was given the identity of a cook who made "the most delicious pancakes in the world" (76). At one point she was displayed as quite the hero, with the chaos of the Civil War as her stage setting. Her cooking skills proved to become an act of rescue for her owner, "Louisiana's Colonel Higbee, a prosperous planter on the Mississippi" (qtd. in Manring *Slave* 76). When Union soldiers threatened to rip the Colonel's moustache off, the faithful old slave made her heroic appearance as his rescuer: she offered the soldiers her tasteful pancakes. Of course, the soldiers accepted the proposal, and while they enjoyed the wonderful taste of Aunt Jemima's secret recipe, the Colonel escaped (76). Wright's stories thus fit in nicely with Green's performances: Aunt Jemima was staged as a piece in the fantasized puzzle which made up the Old South of benevolent slavery. Subsequently, this version of the mammy figure stands forth as a very clear example of how the mammy stereotype is constructed as a fantasy.

Since the launch of the pancake products in 1889, the features of Aunt Jemima have undergone significant changes. Several images and portrayals were used to front the product, and the earliest version available today is the above-mentioned front cover of Wright's *The Life of Aunt Jemima, the Most Famous Colored Woman in the World*, ca. 1895 (fig. 1). Robert L. Craig's thoughts on ethnicity in relation to advertising products are useful in relation to my reading of Aunt Jemima. He states that by connecting "diacritica," the unconcealed symbols of identity, with consumerism, the discourse of marketing is really one of ethnicity: "[a]ll advertisements work by filling their images with symbols that transfer their values to products" ("Designing" 34). The history of Aunt Jemima can be used as a good example of how the diacritica of skin colour functions as an identifiable marker for the representation of ethnicity. Wright's image displays a very black African American woman with a brightly coloured bandanna on her head. Her smile and eyes are happy, and in the background are African American slaves picking cotton in the fields; the image clearly points to antebellum times. This

gives the impression that Aunt Jemima's contentment is based on her life as a slave, and cheerful as ever, she reminisces about her joyful days of slavery in the South. Reading this in light of Craig's ideas, this stereotypical image of Aunt Jemima brings up connections and connotations to slavery as a blissful and harmonized institution, and the pancake mix product itself becomes filled with happy and pleasant associations.

We know that the image of Nancy Green was used from 1893 and onwards to advertise the product; however, the products came in several versions, and some advertisements did not



Fig. 2. Rigney and Company's "Aunt Jemima's Pancake Syrup," evidence from the court case in 1915. Source: Patrick Connelly; Christopher Zarr "Aunt Jemima, What Took You So Long?" *The National Archives* 3 Aug. 2014. Web. 12 Sep. 2014.

reflect Green's face as clearly as others.

One image is particularly interesting in relation to this, and marks the point of no return for the representation of the mammy figure. Via various detours and changes of ownership, the company had renamed itself "The Aunt Jemima Mills Company" in 1903 (Manring *Slave* 76). In 1915 the successful company filed a lawsuit against

Rigney and Company, one of many businesses imitating the Aunt Jemima

brand to earn money from the company's familiar trademark (Matt Soniak). The Aunt Jemima Mills won, based on the claim from their lawyers that Rigney and Company "created in the minds of purchasers the belief that the said goods are a product of the plaintiff" (Soniak). This is understandable, seeing as The Rigney and Company's "Aunt Jemima's Pancake Syrup" (fig. 2) is quite similar to the Aunt Jemima Mills Company's product (fig. 3). Thus, the Aunt Jemima Mills Company now held the copyright of Aunt Jemima's approval stamp.

With the copyright and ruling of the “Aunt Jemima” products, came the copyright of the *representation* of Aunt Jemima. The Aunt Jemima Mills Company’s evidence in the court case

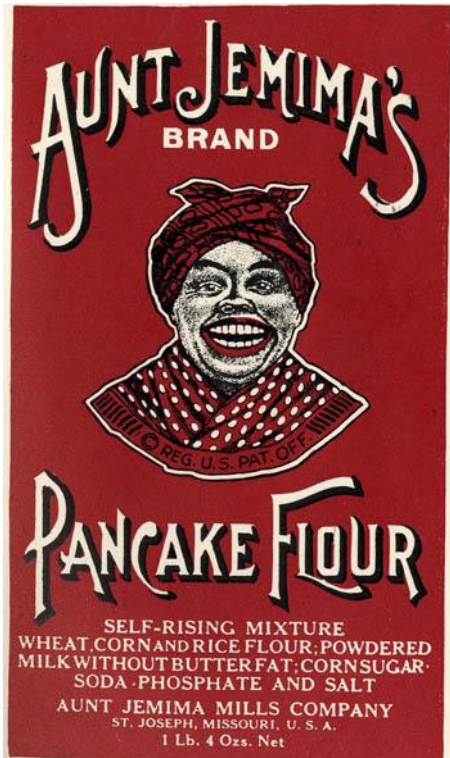


Fig. 3. Aunt Jemima Mills Company's “Aunt Jemima’s Self-Rising Pancake Flour,” evidence in the court case in 1915. Source: Patrick Connelly; Christopher Zarr “Aunt Jemima, What Took You So Long?” *The National Archives* 3 Aug. 2014. Web. 12 Sep. 2014.

presents to the buyer an African American woman with an even higher degree of stereotypical traits than Wright’s front cover (fig. 3). The familiar bandanna is still found on her head, as is her scarf. From the size and features of her face, it is quite apparent that Aunt Jemima is not a petite woman, a portrayal which emphasizes her desexualised appearance. Perhaps the most prominent feature is her animalistic grin. This particularity emphasises the “inferiority” of Aunt Jemima’s race; simultaneously, her “smile” in general is most likely supposed to bring forth the kindness of her status as a mammy. Her smile is, however, overshadowed by the disturbing grin, an unflattering trait which makes it hard to believe the company succeeded in their attempt to raise any joyful

connotations with the buyers.

From 1918, advertisement of the products became more organized, and Nancy Green’s portrait featured most of the products and ads (Manring “Aunt Jemima” 43), and Aunt Jemima acquired more human features than before. Green’s pleasant and inviting smile still reflected the constructed past of happy slavery, but gone were the cotton fields in the background and the grotesque grin of Rutt’s imagination. When Nancy Green tragically died in a car accident in 1923, the white framing of Aunt Jemima reached new heights. Green turned out to be the loser in the Aunt Jemima game. Manring (77) comments that headlines such as “Aunt Jemima



Fig. 4. Nancy Green continued to live on as Aunt Jemima even after her death. This advertisement is from 1933, ten years after the accident which killed Green. Source: Modern Hermeneut “Fairy Godmothers and Magical Negroes: Part 10” modern-hermeneut.blog *Modern Hermeneut*, 15 Apr. 2013. Web. 14 Sep. 2014.

about Green’s death enlightened the readers more about the fictional character of Aunt Jemima than they did about Green’s life. And interestingly, her image was not removed from the products. When the Quaker Oats Company purchased the Aunt Jemima Mills in 1925, they upgraded the advertisements (Manring *Slave* 77). One such example is displayed on fig. 4, which displays a 1933 advertisement of Aunt Jemima, featuring Green’s portrait. The Aunt Jemima diacritic even clung to Green’s memory until as recently as 1989, when a reporter from Gannett News Service stated that in “1923, Aunt Jemima, 89, and jolly as ever, died in a car accident” (qtd. in Manring *Slave* 78)⁴. It is now apparent that whereas Charles Jackson won the race of finding the personification of Aunt Jemima in 1893, Green did not. In death, and even years later, Green had lost the rights to her own identity, and was only remembered as an embodiment of Aunt Jemima.

In Aunt Jemima we can also find another diacritic: traces of a stereotypical relationship between the mammy and her surrogate children. The white boy eating pancakes while smiling at Aunt Jemima on fig. 5 is one such example. In literature set in the antebellum South, the mammy’s role as a second mother for her white children was of course one of importance; in

⁴ The context for this news report is lost in history; Manring does not state the background for the report, nor is it found in the online Gannett News Service’s archives. Regardless of this, the report displays how current Aunt Jemima still is.

fact, she was often described as “part of the family” by several members of the household. Taking a look at the advertisement on figs. 4 and 5, we clearly see that it is this warm and loving household atmosphere, of which the mammy is part, that the setting is out to display. Although the housewives of the early to mid-20th century had not experienced the presence of an antebellum mammy in their own childhood, advertisements such as figs. 4 and 5 clearly stated that they were still able to enjoy what was left of her: her cooking. Best of all, and as the

housewife on fig. 5 states:

“With a box of your ready-mix in my kitchen, it’s like having you there in person, Aunt Jemima!” It is clear that the role of Aunt Jemima in this advertisement is not only that of a cook; she still serves her role as a mammy.



Green’s life embodies the connection between the real mammy and Aunt Jemima as her representation. Keeping the life history of the fictional Aunt Jemima in mind, the retrospect view of Nancy Green’s life appears to be one of circularity. Enslaved,

Fig. 5. Aunt Jemima advertisement from 1940. Source: “Aunt Jemima’s Magic Ready-Mix” *Gallery of Graphic Design*. 29 August 2003. Web. 12 Sep. 2014.

Green was born into the days of the actual mammy. When freed, she continued the same path as so many others, and started to work as a domestic servant. Her job as a cook never allowed her to leave the imprisonment of racial hierarchy. Through her job as Aunt Jemima, Green turned backwards in time, and through the mammy stereotype she became a symbol of the enslaved past of African Americans. Thus, Green's entire life was one of incarceration, starting out as a slave and returning in the role of one.

As we retrospectively consider the circular history and surroundings of Green's life, we can see an interesting aspect in connection with the brand itself. As slaves were often literally branded with the initials of their slave owners to obstruct any successful escape from captivity, so was Green branded with the brand of the Quaker Oats Company: Aunt Jemima. Not only did Green lose her own persona in death; she was given an identity that would stick to her for a long time. This branding continued well after her own consent; in death she was not liberated of this eternal print. This identity in a way became one with Nancy Green's picture; seeing a picture of Nancy Green, people will most probably think they are looking at a picture of Aunt Jemima. This aspect does not stop with Green, however; it moves on to the general stereotype of the mammy. For instance, Rutt's choice of giving Aunt Jemima the mammy's bandanna and apron was no coincidence. The stereotype was so much alive when he decided to include these features in his product that he contributed to its survival. Aunt Jemima as a product subsequently contributed to the continuation of the branding of the African American stereotype.

Today, we see a very different Aunt Jemima on the box of pancake mix than we did almost a century ago. When Green died in 1923, the search for a new Aunt Jemima started again. A number of women were hired to perform at events across the country, and it was important that their appearance reflected the same "Southern values" that the image on the box did. However, in 1989 Aunt Jemima's well-known bandanna and scarf were replaced by a lace

collar and a pair of pearl earrings, and in 1992 her head was slightly tilted “into a more upright position” (“Aunt Jemima’s Historical Timeline”). The removal of the bandanna, a feature usually associated with slave women, in a way symbolizes the Quaker Oats Company’s attempt to remove from the equation the racial prejudice and connotations to slavery that Aunt Jemima’s brand brings with it. The addition of the pearl earrings, indicating status and wealth, also symbolizes a certain change in the representation of African Americans as mere stereotypes. There is a confluence of historical change here: the image of Aunt Jemima transitions from the captivity of her racialized past, into a space where African Americans are accepted as equal human beings in society, echoing the events that were taking place in the U.S. around the mid-20th century.

The framing of Aunt Jemima continues in various venues that can be relived today in almost the exact same manner as when the product was first released. “The Aunt Jemima Old Time Radio show,” which was a series of episodes running from five to thirty minutes, airing between 1929 and 1953, were very popular (Dunning 50). Segments from some of the episodes are available on YouTube⁵, offering the present day audience Aunt Jemima’s advice on how to be happy (50). We of course learn that the trick is to eat her delicious pancakes, because “a pancake day is a happy day!” (“Aunt Jemima – Liza Liza”). What is peculiar, however, is that Aunt Jemima’s voice on the radio shows were the voices of Caucasian actresses Tess Gardella and Harriette Widmer, who both speak in the dialect of the African American vernacular. Again, Aunt Jemima was staged as a stereotype. The audio in a way functioned as an echo of the previously mentioned minstrel shows: Aunt Jemima was a white act, a fantasy, constructing an imagined past.

Through the Quaker Oats Company’s continuation of the Aunt Jemima product line, consumers still participate in one of American history’s most glossy portrayals of the past. Aunt

⁵ See for example “Aunt Jemima ‘I’se in Town, Honey!’” and “Aunt Jemima – Liza Liza”

Jemima was never real. She was an advertisement with the diacritic goal of connecting the consumer market with a utopian and fantasized South of an upright and harmonic slavery. Strangely, this diacritic has survived society's awakening to the racial stereotypes surrounding us on several arenas. Take a look at the syrup bottle or the pancake mix on the kitchen counter, in the grocery shop or as advertised on television; the black mammy figure is there. Or more correctly, the *white* black mammy is there. Of course, the image of Aunt Jemima is not the same today as it was at the end of the 19th century. The staging of the image, however, is as present as ever. In the following we shall explore further Aunt Jemima as a travelling image – a theme we have touched upon. We shall see the impact and reactions that the symbol of Aunt Jemima has had through times, and how we can “use” her to locate moments in history. These are the moments that have lead up to the contemporary Aunt Jemima image which can be seen on the front of the boxes of pancake mix; she is no longer depicted as black, but more “brown” or mixed race. As the Quaker Oats Company so nicely puts it: “The Aunt Jemima products continue to stand for warmth, nourishment and trust – qualities you’ll find in loving moms from *diverse* backgrounds who care for and want the very best for their families” (“Aunt Jemima’s Historical Timeline,” italics my own).

1.2. Adding Layers: The Mammy’s Travel between Meanings

Images are gateways to historical trajectories, and their role in reclaiming moments in history is immense. W.J.T. Mitchell argues that images should be treated as objects on their own terms, with “equal rights with language, not to be turned into language. They want neither to be levelled into a “history of images” nor elevated into a “history of art,” but to be seen as complex individuals occupying multiple subject positions and identities” (47). The idea of the image having its own identity is interesting in the context of a concept that represents one of history’s most intimate human interactions. It is important, however, not to look only at how Aunt Jemima is framed into a representation of a mythical past. In the realm of the products’ power

and influence we must look beyond the advertisements' diacritical signposts, and find out how her image has travelled into other meanings. The notion of the travelling image can be used as a way to interpret the reality of the historical mammy.

According to Mieke Bal, concepts and images can tell us a great deal about moments in time. As briefly stated in the introductory chapter to this thesis, concepts are not static: "They travel – between disciplines, between individual scholars, between historical periods, and between geographically dispersed academic communities. Between disciplines, their meaning, reach, and operational value differ" (24). The same can be said for the way images travel across time: from Aunt Jemima's beginning as a meeting point between Southerners' love for an imagined tradition and the consumer market, the brand is still a success today. The *stereotype* of Aunt Jemima has managed to survive in a century where the struggle for improved rights for African Americans has had a deep impact on society. When it comes to the image on the front of the Aunt Jemima products today, we do, actually, see a change. Starting out as a black caricature based on minstrel shows and myths, the fantasy of the mammy figure, embodied in Aunt Jemima, has undergone several alterations, such as in her skin tone and details of clothing and accessories. And strangely, the Aunt Jemima of the Quaker Oats Company's *current* products reminds us more about the Latina nanny of the 21st century than the original "mammy version" of Aunt Jemima. Before I turn to this transition, however, I want to consider another important branch of her trajectory. Considering the brand's foundation as a racist image of the mammy, we are left with a choice. We can accept her – her history and the images of her – as belonging to the past. Alternatively, we can read her as an image that brings on and keeps alive the memory of a past of slavery, minstrel shows and other moments of racial inequality; in short, one that distinguished between human beings based on nothing but skin colour. However, as we shall see in the following chapters, the mammy figure continues to engage with the

present. In the following, we shall see how some people have refused to accept Aunt Jemima's meaning as a stereotype only.

In 1972 artist Betye Saar made a figure of Aunt Jemima for an exhibition in Oregon and Aunt Jemima was able to strike back against the century long imprisonment of a white representation of the past. In an interview published by the National Visionary Leadership Project (NVLP), Saar states that even though the artists' task was to make a piece of art which had to do with their own heroes, she wanted to make her protests heard. The result, *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*, offers a summary of several derogatory images of Aunt Jemima. In the middle of the installation we see a large statue of Aunt Jemima with extremely stereotypical and offensive traits such as large red lips, very black skin, and a colourful bandanna. Standing on a bed of cotton, the image clearly reminds the viewer that the days of slavery are not gone. However, holding a broom in one hand and a rifle in the other, the viewer is also made aware of a sense of resistance toward the stereotypical representation and staging of African Americans. The figure is holding up a picture of another Aunt Jemima, this one cast in the role as a mammy figure for the white child *she* holds in her arms. To disrupt this harmony, a dark fist clutching a hand grenade reaches up from the ground, indicating the anger and wrath behind the struggle to break free from the stereotype.

Saar's art piece in a way changes the course of Aunt Jemima as a travelling image. In the interview, Saar points out a very important fact: "I made this in '72," she says, "and things haven't changed that much" (NVLP). After having gathered derogatory images of Aunt Jemima, Saar desired to recycle them into a more positive version. Her goal was to stop the representation of African Americans as stereotypes, and to take the stereotype back from its maker. The way to achieve that goal, she felt, was to convey a message that is stronger than the stereotype itself. Therefore, the weapon as a symbol of empowerment was placed in Aunt Jemima's hand. *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* has been exhibited to the public, and thus the

original image has assumed a new layer of meaning. For Saar's piece has indeed travelled: it has been exhibited at Centre Pompidou in Paris, the Brooklyn Museum in New York, and is currently owned by the University of California's Berkeley Art Museum & Pacific Film Archive.

Saar's contribution to the travelling of the image of Aunt Jemima illuminates well Bal's thoughts on how the image has the ability to travel through time, being constantly added new imprints, facets and layers of meaning. This participates in a larger process, that of *palimpsesting*. The figure of Aunt Jemima comes across as a "multilayered record." As we remember from the introductory chapter to this thesis, the notion of the palimpsest is "an involuted phenomenon where otherwise unrelated texts are involved entangled, intricately interwoven, interrupting and inhabiting each other" (Dillon "Reinscribing" 245). Saar's contribution to the image of Aunt Jemima displays well the process of erasing, overlaying and adding new imprints.

Not only does her image travel; during the summer of 2014, one of the "real" Aunt Jemimas appeared in newspapers, "claiming" independence from her white owners. Journalist Tom Huddleston, Jr. reported in August that "Aunt Jemima Heirs Sue Pepsi, Quaker Oats for \$2 Billion in Royalties." The Aunt Jemima in question in this particular article was Anna Short Harrington, one of the "actual" Aunt Jemimas. According to her grandchildren, Harrington had played the well-known role in the 1930s, and in 1937 her face was placed on the cover of the "Aunt Jemima" products. Not only do Harrington's heirs claim that the Quaker Oats Company deliberately hid the fact that their grandmother was an employee with the company; they also claim that the company stole 64 of her "recipes and 22 complete menus" (Huddleston) ⁶. Although this lawsuit did not receive much attention from the public, it may mark a turning

⁶ Whether or not this is true, is at the present time not determined.

point for the mammy: through her descendants, she has finally broken free from her owners. The mammy's dedication to "her white family" is officially over.

1.3. Conclusion

The stereotypical portrayal of the mammy continued after Beecher Stowe's classic. While literature containing the mammy figure from the 1860s and 70s is scarce, perhaps due to the Civil War's stop in correspondence between Southern writers and Northern printing services (which were mostly located in New York, Cincinnati and Philadelphia at the time), the mammy stereotype figured frequently from the 1880s and onward. We see the mammy figure in *Dialect Tales* (1883) and *Gran'mammy Tales* (1884) by Katherine Sherwood Bonner McDowell, who wrote under the name of Sherwood Bonner. A 1890 popular children's song and poem book called *Mammy's Baby* by Amy Ella Blanchard featured exactly what its title indicates. Charles Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901) also includes a mammy figure by the name of Mammy Jane.

However, during the twentieth century a change in the image of the mammy started. Layers were added, and the already mentioned skin colour of Aunt Jemima is one of them. But before we explore the representation of the domestic worker in contemporary Latina fiction, we need to spend a little time on the representation of mammy figure of the period of segregation. We shall find that her portrayal is not as univocal and corresponding to pro-slavery authors' views; however, the palimpsest structure of the text reveals that not all has been erased. For although the image of the mammy has been changed with time, and with the intention of fitting into the changes of time, the cultural legacy of the mammy survives today because of literary and visual representations which consists of traces of the original stereotype. The image of the happy and content mammy becomes what Vågnes refers to as an "agent" which shapes "cultural and, inevitably, human memory of events" (148).

2. Tracing the “Mammyscript” in Fannie Hurst’s *Imitation of Life*

2.1. Introduction

The familiar character of Aunt Jemima appears again in literature, more precisely in Fannie Hurst’s *Imitation of Life*. This novel was published in 1933, only three years before Margaret Mitchell’s classic *Gone With the Wind*, which provides the perhaps most powerful image of the mammy created during the early twentieth century. Mitchell’s portrait of African Americans is of course benign compared to for example D.W. Griffith’s 1915 silent film *The Birth of a Nation*, based on Thomas Dixon Jr.’s novel and play *The Clansman* (1905). These two offer an extremely racist view on African Americans and support the Ku Klux Klan. Nonetheless, the three works of Mitchell, Griffith and Dixon all fall under the same category in that they continue to stereotype the mammy figure⁷. Hurst, however, attempts to move away from the inflamed era of slavery in racial history, where Mitchell, Griffith and Dixon set their works. In Hurst’s setting of the progressive 1930s, we meet what seems to be an equally progressive version of Aunt Jemima: “Aunt Delilah.”

Where Mitchell’s and Griffith’s characters of “Mammy,” whose names signal their place, only exist to serve their white families, Hurst’s character of Delilah Johnston has a more active role, and her representation is more progressive. By choosing her contemporary modern society as setting, Hurst creates an advanced representation of two single mothers who build an international pancake empire by merging the business sense of Delilah’s white employer, Bea Pullman, with Delilah’s excellent cooking. Not only is Delilah graced with a far richer persona

⁷ These three works undeniably take the mammy stereotype to an extreme level, and even stand out in the body of mammy portrayals. As previously mentioned, Beecher Stowe’s classic marked a distinction between early and later portrayals of the mammy in how her novel was the first to portray the mammy as the stereotypical figure we know today. For a thorough analysis on how Mitchell and Griffith’s works differ from the antebellum depictions of the mammy figure, please turn to Wallace-Sanders.

than Mitchell gives “Mammy,” the controversial aspect of *passing* is also present in Delilah’s daughter, Peola, who ends up crossing the colour line at the end of the novel. This notion combined with a modern version of the mammy places the novel in a radical tradition compared to for example Mitchell’s novel. Several of the many 1930s’ readers of *Imitation of Life* felt that “Hurst had created black characters with depth and humanity” (Itzkovitz viii), and the *Cincinnati Enquirer* praised her for giving “one of the most magnificently drawn characters in all the great store of literature depicting Negro life” (xxii).

This reception was, however, not representative for all of Hurst’s critics. In 1934, *Imitation of Life* was adapted into a movie by John M. Stahl. One year later, perceiving both the novel and the film as offensive toward African Americans, Sterling Brown wrote in his review of the movie that it played upon the “old stereotype of the contented Mammy, and the tragic mulatto” (88, qtd. in Caputi 701). An intense correspondence between Hurst and Brown followed. Hurst, who was a white liberal and active in organizations such as the NAACP and the National Urban League (714), responded to Brown’s review and voiced her dismay that “a “thinking Negro” could express so limited a view” (701). Hurst further reprimanded Brown “for neglecting to realize “the important social value of this picture,” seeing as it displays “a consideration of the Negro as part of the social pattern of American life” (Hurst “Letter” 122, qtd. in Caputi 701). Clearly, Hurst felt a sense of consternation, or disappointment, at Brown’s lack of “gratitude” for her attempt at a nuanced contribution to a one-sided literary discourse⁸.

With these two differing receptions in mind, I shall explore *Imitation of Life* as a participant in the palimpsest of the mammy figure. For when scraping off the veneer of Delilah as a seemingly “equal” character with the white Bea, a series of layers appears which may give

⁸ Strong reactions also came from the prominent Harlem writer Langston Hughes. His reactions to the movie adaptation was utterly positive, and he expressed gratitude to Hurst with what he felt was the “the first serious treatment of the Negro problem in America” (Hughes “Letter” qtd. in Caputi 703), as expressed in a letter to Hurst in 1937. A year later, however, Hughes published a play called *Limitations of Life*, which satirically reversed the roles of white and black in Hurst’s novel (Caputi 702). Bea was cast in the role as mammy, and Delilah was turned into a rich woman “speaking perfect English with Oxford accent” (Hughes *Limitations* 657, qtd. in Caputi 702).

a new meaning to the surface. I will suggest that the Progressive Era setting of the novel displays a seemingly modern version of the mammy; however, underneath this surface lie secret traces of the past, and they refuse to bury the mammy stereotype.

But before exploring Hurst's novel, a brief historical background for the 1930s is needed. During Reconstruction (1865-77), almost all freed black women who moved to urban areas went into domestic labour (Campbell and Fraser). What prevented them from acquiring jobs as for example clerks or sales ladies, was often their lack of education and training, but the decisive aspect was their skin colour: during this period, African Americans were still regarded as inferiors in the South. This view was in reality an aspect maintained from slavery, and it was upheld and legalized for almost a century.

After Reconstruction several states in the South and border areas started confining African Americans' rights (Pilgrim "What Was Jim Crow?"). These restrictions, commonly called "Jim Crow laws," divided society into a hierarchical system of skin colour that lasted until the mid-1960s. In regards to African American domestic workers, particularly maids and nannies, these rules followed them around the clock, not only in society in general but also in their working environment under the direct supervision of their white superiors. Of course, this was the case for a number of work places, but for domestic workers, the inequalities were emphasized by the employers' extraordinary demands of love and servility at the same time. Katherine van Wormer, David W. Jackson III, and Charletta Sudduth's collection of interviews with domestic workers from the Jim Crow South reveal several of these inequalities between black and white. Low wages and long hours were part of their job, as well as being required to enter the house through the back door, or use separate plates, which often were the same plate as the family dog ate from (van Wormer, Jackson, Sudduth 130, 158). Some were asked to use a separate bathroom; others were not assigned a bathroom of their own and were still refused to use that of their white employers (131, 85). Being subjected to these inequalities while still

expected to give their love and dedication to the white family was the reality of being “part of the family” – a typical description of the segregation era maid or nanny by their employers⁹.

Although racial segregation was only legally practiced in Southern states, the way of life in the North was not easy for coloured women. Starting early in the 1900s, as part of the Great Migration, many descendants of slaves moved North in search of a better life, much like their parents’ quest for improved living conditions after Emancipation. However, in many Northern areas there still existed a racial hierarchy. In Susan Tucker’s 1970s and 80s interviews with domestic workers and employers from the Jim Crow South, one of the domestics, Martha Calvert, sums up African American women’s situation in the North during this time: “So you’re looking at me, and you can see I’m black and you know I’m from the South, so you know domestic work is something I know about, right? Just given those things about me” (38).

The mammy stereotype was alive in literature as well as in reality. Susan Tucker (43) states that society after the Civil War included little of the plantation way of life; however, whites still held on to their superior position over coloured people. Although domestics were underpaid and treated poorly, they were still described as “part of the family” by their white employers. In this statement lies an implicit expectation that the feeling was mutual; however, this was not the case. For whites, the domestic worker carried a tradition which had its root in the Old South. Tucker argues that for many whites, the maid became a symbol of this time period, and “the stereotype of the mammy remained. Black women caught in the entanglement of race and economics, in turn, realized that to retain their jobs they must sometimes act according to this mother image [as mammy]” (43). This “act” is also an important context for Hurst’s *Imitation of Life*.

⁹ See among others Alice Childress’s *Like One of the Family: Conversations from a Domestic’s Life* (1956) and Susan Tucker’s *Telling Memories Among Southern Women: Domestic Workers and Their Employers in the Segregated South* (1988).

2.2. *Imitation of Life* by Fannie Hurst

Imitation of Life tells the story of Bea Pullman, a white, young woman whom we meet at the age of 17, mourning the death of her mother. She is forced to take over her mother's role as the backbone of domesticity, but marrying Mr. Pullman, family friend and tenant in their house, rescues her from this situation. When he, too, dies, Bea must find a way to provide for herself, her baby daughter Jessie, and her father who struggles to recover from a stroke. She attempts to run her late husband's syrup business on, but needs a maid. She hires Delilah Johnston, whose "mammy qualities" become a liberation for Bea both inside and outside the home. Using Delilah as an Aunt Jemima-like front figure, Bea expands her syrup business to include products Delilah herself has come up with, such as heart-shaped candy.

Years later the small business has expanded, and the little family has moved from their house on Arctic Avenue in New Jersey to New York. Bea remains unmarried, and finds herself a lonely business woman with weakened ties with her daughter, who grows up under the care of Delilah and goes away to boarding school. When Bea falls in love with the manager of her corporation, Frank Flake, life seems fuller. The story turns when Flake and Jessie meet, and unaware that her mother is to marry him, Jessie falls in love. When Flake and Jessie announce their engagement, Bea keeps her feelings for Flake to herself and returns to her lonely life as a business woman. Simultaneously, Delilah struggles with her own daughter, Peola, who is the same age as Jessie. Peola is very light-skinned, and in Zora Neale Hurston's¹⁰ "A Glossary of Harlem Slang" from the 1930s, published in 1942, her name is listed as "a term meaning a very white Negro girl" (94, qtd. in Itzkovitz xliii). From an early age, Peola attempts to pass for

¹⁰ We may keep in mind that Fannie Hurst was a liberal and well acquainted with several of Harlem's black writers (Caputi 702). One was Neale Hurston, who was hire by Hurst as her secretary in 1925. This position some time in the following year shifted to "chauffeur and general companion" (704). Living and travelling together, the two women seemed quite close; however, in letters between the two, Hurst addressed Hurston by her first name, Zora (704). Hurston, on the other hand, followed racial etiquette at the time, and addressed her white friend with the more formal "Miss Hurst," or even with her full name, "Fannie Hurst" (704). One may speculate in what lay behind this; however, it nonetheless tells us that although Hurst was quite modern in her thoughts on race relations, she was also a product of her time.

white, and as an adult, she feels she cannot live her life according to her mother's ideas. She ends up crossing the colour line and cutting all ties with her mother and her heritage¹¹.

As mentioned, the figure of Delilah and Hurst's text participate in a palimpsest. They also form part of what Sarah Dillon refers to as the *palimpsestuous*, namely "the inventive process of creating relations where there may, or should, be none; hence the appropriateness of its epithet's phonetic similarity to the incestuous" ("Reinscribing" 254). Traces that should not be – traces of what is presumably gone – may reappear. In the following I will first explore how the persistence of the antebellum mammy's legacy rises to the seemingly complex surface. Secondly, we shall revisit the topic of diacritical advertising from Chapter 1 through Bea's use of the mammy stereotype as front figure for her products. Thirdly, we shall explore the character of Delilah's attempts to fight against the text's, as well as Bea's, way of framing her into the white representation of the mammy, which is linked to her daughter's passing. Finally, I will conclude on the question of what Hurst contributes to in the literary tradition of the mammy: a complex and modern version of the mammy, or the original stereotype?

2.2.1. Staging the mammy

Delilah fills the role of the mammy in *Imitation of Life*. However, when the narrator states that her "insincerities were so palpably sincere" (Hurst *Imitation* 83), it is clear that Delilah is not a mammy, she only acts in the role as one. This is particularly emphasized in relation to the children. As we remember from Chapter 1, the antebellum mammy had a "natural preference" for her white children over her biological ones due to racial hierarchy, and one passage in Hurst's novel especially illustrates this: "The duet of their howling might bring her running intuitively to her own [child], but the switch was without hesitancy to the white child, every

¹¹ Without going into details, a note must be made on the parallels to Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929.) Hurst echoes Larson's story in Peola's crossing of the colour line, as well as her marriage to a white man who is unaware of her mixed race. Both women fear being revealed, and where Clare simply decides not to have children, Peola turns to more drastic measures and discontinues her past.

labor of service adhering rigidly to that order” (83). Delilah does not tend to the “white child,” Jessie, before her own because of any “natural preference”; she behaves according to what is expected from her rather than in agreement with her own urge to tend for her own daughter first. In other words, it is a *performance* as a mammy figure, and not part of Delilah’s persona. This echoes Susan Tucker’s statement that black women during the segregation era must model themselves after, and act according to, the stereotypical mammy image.

A series of other traits is added to Delilah’s character, all evoking the stereotype. One is the particular maternal role, which can be recognized from the discussion of the origin of the mammy (cf. p. 15 in this thesis). From Delilah’s first appearance at the end of the novel’s Chapter 15, she is established as a motherly figure. Providing for Bea, Jessie, Peola, and Mr. Chipley, the faithful servant creates a sense of safety and warmth in the house on Arctic Avenue. After a long day of attempting to sell syrup, Bea returns home to the “household warmed by the furnace of Delilah” (Hurst *Imitation* 82). Delilah’s welcome, which includes the rubbing of Bea’s feet and calling her “honey-chile” (82-3) no less than four times in that scene, indicates a motherly side which surpasses Delilah’s servant position. The closeness between the two women also reminds us of the bond between mother and child. In referring to Mr. Chipley as “chile-of-de-chair” (213) or “chair-chile” (266), and Jessie as “mah white chile” (82), we understand that she places herself in the position as mammy to the entire household.

I will suggest that by exaggerating the features of Delilah, Hurst’s text produces what Dillon terms a “palimpsestuous” structure created by a “reappearance of the underlying script” (“Reinscribing” 245), and establishing a revival of the stereotype. One example is Delilah’s exaggerated features, as we see for instance in this description: “Delilah might be said to have risen like a vast black sun over the troubled waters of the domestic scene, laying [sic] them and the hordes of fears, large and small, that had dogged her heels all day” (Hurst *Imitation* 78). These words describe the mammy’s “natural” presence in the household. Bea’s house on Arctic

Avenue is chaotic prior to Delilah's arrival, but she *rises* over it and takes control. The natural elements like the "sun" and "waters" support the impression that her belonging in the house is "natural" and "organic," much like that of the original plantation mammy. At the same time, this choice of words, *vast* in particular, brings life to another stereotypical trait of the "original script": the mammy's size. Her bodily dimensions are described as "immense" (79), and provides "the enormous tower of Delilah" (99) with an appetite which explains why the "buxom negro woman who, with the best intentions in the world, swell[s] the food budget so considerably" (77).

Not only is Delilah's size emphasized in every way possible, it is also described in an almost grotesque way for the reader. When Bea finally affords to offer her servant her salary, it is almost as if we see Delilah's reactions in slow motion: "This she refused with such loud ejaculations, stretchings of the orifice of her long mouth into a very red and very white cave of long-drawn winds, that meekly she was forced to restore the money to her purse" (*Imitation* 79). Delilah is here described as anything but pleasant and ladylike, and any temptation to consider Delilah's appearance attractive or enjoyable is removed. Further, the "red of her easily-hinged large mouth, packed with the white laughter of her stunning allotment of hound-clean teeth" (79) is revealed for the reader, underlining the exaggeration of the mammy as a non-desirable object. By conjuring such impressions and feelings, Hurst's text revitalizes the "underlying script" of the old, stereotypical, desexualised mammy both internally and externally.

Another example of dehumanization, also in accordance with the original script of the antebellum mammy figure, is the description of Delilah's hand as "black" and "crocodile-like" (Hurst *Imitation* 90). The direct parallel to this animal is somewhat morbid and leaves little to imagination. On page 78 Delilah's "hand of a crocodile" is even described as "horny," portraying Delilah's skin as hard or callous, and thus anything but feminine. This evokes the

animalistic grin of Aunt Jemima (cf. p. 24 in this thesis), and depicts the body of Delilah as an undesirable one which is meant for working in the home rather than being admired.

Such extremities are common features in the antebellum mammy stereotype, and belong to the political agenda of many proslavery authors. Traditionally, and as discussed in Chapter 1, the mammy's body was portrayed as unflattering, mannish and desexualised by authors who were out to dispel the accusations against Southern white males taking advantage of female black slaves (Clinton 201-2). Depicting her body as the direct opposite of the Western ideal of femininity, the author was able to "verify" that the mammy, who came very close with her white family, was not an object of desire for the white man (Pilgrim "The Mammy Caricature"). In Hurst's novel these foundational tendencies are taken to a higher level: not only is Delilah's size portrayed as unflattering; it is also ridiculed. When facing crises, her body is described in peculiar shapes, which echoes descriptions of structures usually associated with domesticity. This is an oddity of the text, and I will suggest that it is not coincidental.

The first example of Delilah being compared to structures is when Peola's sunny school day is interrupted by heavy rain, and "Delilah, in a cape that gave her the appearance of a slightly asthmatic rubber tent, set[s] out for the school-house with galoshes and mackintosh for Peola" (Hurst *Imitation* 185). The concern she feels for her daughter's health derives from a fear that Peola will die from bronchitis that her father "cotched in jes' such a storm" (185); but Delilah's fear is here undermined by the ridicule of her body. This unsympathetic description continues when Delilah faces a pain attack caused by a "great swollen protuberance" (265). The narrator describes her as lying on the floor, "running with sweat that rolled onto a clean red-and-white-striped bungalow apron that evidently served as nightgown and gave her something of the appearance of a boathouse on a beach" (264). In these examples the narrator expresses no sympathy for Delilah's pain. Rather, describing her in the shape of a "tent" and a "bungalow" places her in a position which is inseparable from the original mammy. More precisely, the

reference to buildings seats Delilah within the sphere of domesticity, and the mammy's original surroundings of the plantation Big House comes to mind. Thus, Delilah is reinscribed as a servant in the domestic sphere.

One scene in the novel is particularly crucial, as it ties all of Delilah's stereotypical traits together and confirms her role and representation as a mammy figure. When Bea decides to join the First Church Fair for business promotion, she has their booth built in the style of a Pullman train car, and recreates the antebellum domesticity of the typical kitchen in the Big House on the plantation. The house was classically filled with the mammy's sense of warmth and love – both components in the very special Southern domesticity in antebellum literature. Bea recreates this warm sense of domesticity as the fairgoers rush into the Pullman booth to get out of the rain, and the booth thus functions as somewhat of a plantation house through the “downright soothing” (Hurst *Imitation* 109) ambience, delicious waffles and “coffee that lifted its aroma from a boiling, nickel-plated pot” (109). The large, smiling, African American woman behind the kitchen counter fits perfectly into this recreation of the Southern plantation. The sense of domesticity is evoked among the customers, and when one of them states: “Say, Mammy, don't care if I do have another order of those waffles” (110), the construction of Delilah as a mammy figure is confirmed.

Let us briefly return to the manuscript, or the originator of the mammy, as it was discussed in Chapter 1. The source of the mammy stereotype is the white representation, or the pre-civil war political agenda of labelling the South as a utopian society. The mammy stereotype does not have her roots in reality; she is a literary construction and a fantasy. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines the word “fantasy” as a “[m]ental apprehension of an object of perception; the faculty by which this is performed.” We have seen that the palimpsest reading of Delilah thus far reveals her as corresponding with the stereotypical mammy figure as explored in Chapter 1. It is interesting to regard psychoanalysts Nicolas Abraham and Maria

Torok's definition of a fantasy here, which is "all those representations, beliefs or bodily states that gravitate toward the (...) preservation of the status quo" (125). Although this definition is directed toward the field of psychoanalysis, I would like to suggest its application to the literary figure of the mammy. The resurfacing of the antebellum fantasy in *Imitation of Life's* account of the modern mammy offers a subtle throwback to the utopian Old Southern fantasy. By reinscribing the seemingly progressive and equal character of Delilah into the fantasy, the novel illuminates her lack of progress, and subsequently, her "status quo." In other words, the fantasy has not developed all that much. We shall return to this aspect of the fantasy's own upholding of the status quo later in the chapter and this thesis.

Where the novel hints at racial inequality, John M. Stahl, in his 1934 movie adaptation, visualizes these inequalities by use of strong, symbolic imagery. Historian Donald Bogle comments that the movie adaptation was "the one Hollywood film of the Depression Era that suggested there was such a thing as a contemporary race problem in America" (Turner Classic Movies). This is especially clear in one scene in particular. Stahl uses the previously discussed passage where Delilah rubs Bea's feet as an introduction to a very powerful image. After the



Fig. 6: Image from Stahl's 1934 film adaptation of *Imitation of Life*. Source: "I wanna be white – like I look!" *Filmfanatic.org*, May 13 2014. Web. 9 Dec. 2014.

massaging, the two women retire to their respective bedrooms; Bea's is upstairs whereas Delilah's is located one floor down¹² (fig. 6). This particular way of filming illustrates the inequality between the two characters on several levels. The lighting emphasizes their different skin colours and serves to accentuate how white looks upward and black downward. It is almost as if Bea walks up a stairway to a heaven filled with bright lights, and Delilah is directed the opposite way. The white woman ascends, rises, prospers, whereas the black woman descends, declines, into obscurity.

Stahl's powerful imagery may serve as introduction to a discussion of a crucial difference between the two women. The stair case in fig. 6 in a way also illustrates the social and professional ladder which functions as the dividing line in the dichotomy of Bea and Delilah's lives. The better part of the novel's action revolves around Bea's struggle to provide for her family, and this in turn leads to her success as a business woman. Delilah's presence in the home is crucial. Without her, Bea would not be able to develop her business. The problem with this, as is illustrated in the image from Stahl's movie, is that Delilah's contribution to her white mistress's ascent leads to her own descent.

Bea's development belongs to a literary tradition of the New Woman Ideal, which started in feminist literature during the late 19th century. Female characters belonging to this type of literature took many shapes, but they all had in common a removal from the Ideal Victorian Woman, who typically sacrificed herself for her husband or other members of the family, enjoyed her domestic atmosphere and let men be in the centre (Sage 465-7). The New Woman's ambitions stretched beyond that of motherhood, and she was often portrayed as non-domestic with a tendency to challenge traditional male roles. This ideal is captured in Bea in her rise from rags to riches, or the general American Dream.

¹² This scene is Stahl's creation; it does not appear in Hurst's novel.

The development of the New Woman is a literary reflection of a reality which has its repercussions for the New Woman's African American maid. During the 1920s and 30s, many Northern, white women started to seek work, and their places were no longer necessarily in the home. The black maid subsequently became the primary maternal figure for the white children, and as previously mentioned, many domestic workers felt that during this period, acting like a traditional mammy made their jobs easier in relation to their employers. In the character of Delilah, this act becomes what may be described as a path leading further into the mammy stereotype as she is portrayed as an Aunt Jemima-like pancake queen. While the parallel between Delilah and Aunt Jemima is not new, and can be found in for example the novel's introduction (Itzkovitz viii) as well as in Caputi's analysis (702), I would like to explore it as a deepening of the staging that we have seen in the novel thus far. In the portrayal of the two single women of Bea and Delilah, the contrast of white mobility and black immobility is consolidated.

With Delilah's presence in the home, Bea is liberated from the Victorian Woman Ideal, and can enter the working life of the New Woman. Thus, while Delilah performs the maternal role as the mammy, Bea is the paternal breadwinner. Subsequently, although their domestic sphere does not confirm the traditional gender structure, family order falls into place through their respective roles. The mammy is quite literally "part of the family." It is nonetheless in her home that Bea finds what triggers her business sense: Delilah's baked, "heart-shaped lozenges" (Hurst *Imitation* 85). And so, "Delilah's Hearts [are] on the market" (88).

2.2.2. Staging an "Aunt Delilah" Dreamscape

When the idea of Delilah as the front figure of the "B. Pullman" brand takes shape in Bea's mind, Bea makes use of Delilah's "blackness," or stereotypical traits, to sell the products. As we know, this idea proves successful; but herein also lies an important aspect of the fantasy. Abraham and Torok state that the function of the fantasy is one of preservation and

conservation, and in order to understand it, it is important to identify “the specific topographical change the given fantasy is called upon to resist” (125). In *Imitation of Life*, the “topographical change” lies in the representation of Delilah. For compared to Mitchell and Griffith’s portrayals of the mammy figure, the representation of Delilah is, as previously discussed, quite progressive. She is Bea’s business partner, and their relationship is not only one of business and employment; they are more equal than the typical literary domestic employer – employee relationship. However, we shall see that the fantasy overtakes this change that the text at times reflects, and disrupts any possible development in the representation of Delilah as a progressive African American rather than a mammy figure.

The power of the fantasy is tangible in Bea’s diacritical advertisement of Delilah as a front figure for the “B. Pullman” products. By staging Delilah as a figment of her own imagination, she persistently brings the fantasy of the mammy stereotype to the surface. Around Delilah, Bea constructs a fictional “scape,” which *the Oxford English Dictionary* defines as “forming nouns denoting a view, picture, or (literal or figurative) landscape of a type specified by the first element.” We shall see that this way of staging, this scape (in Norwegian “skape,” create) becomes a “preservation of the *status quo*” (Abraham and Torok 125) of Delilah as a mammy fantasy. The scape becomes a space in which time stands still, and where we encounter the “underlying script.” In the following we shall examine this fictional scape, or what I shall refer to as the *dreamscape*, as a stage for diacritical advertisement, and how it contributes to the enforcement of the stereotype by reaching back to its origin.

Bea’s vision for Delilah as the front figure for her products is as follows: “Delilah’s Hearts! Why not Delilah’s photograph, in her great fluted white cap, and her great fluted white smile on each box?” (Hurst *Imitation* 86). In this context, Robert L. Craig’s thoughts on diacritical advertising from Chapter 1 are worth revisiting: “Ethnic diacritica, like skin color (black models), fashions, hair styles, dialects, and art styles are powerful constructions which

can be used by advertisers because they symbolically represent ethnic identity” (“Picturing” 28). Bea uses her maid’s features in accordance with what Craig in another essay titled “Designing Ethnicity: The Ideology of Images,” refers to as “recognizable signs” (34) of identity. The “fluted white cap” and “fluted white smile” of Delilah arguably parallel the smile of Aunt Jemima, as well as her bandanna, and the way in which they gave associations to the fantasy of the Old South, thus helping the consumers conjure these feelings for the product she advertised. In order to associate the products with utopian Old Southern values, Bea enforces Delilah’s features and subsequently stages her as “mammy to the world” (Hurst *Imitation* 86).

Bea’s suggestion that Delilah’s “mammyness” is a collective understanding of her is the start of a staged scape which is created for the sole purpose of advertising her products. I would like to suggest an understanding of the scape that Bea creates as a *dreamscape*: an imagined scenery which functions as a stage for Delilah’s performance as “Aunt Delilah.” In the middle of the scape that Bea creates we find Delilah, set in the role as the mammy, and around her are several props that constantly work to support and conjure these latent traces and impressions. This staging helps the consumer evoke the same feelings that were elicited half a century earlier by Purd Wright in his pamphlet *The Life of Aunt Jemima, the Most Famous Colored Woman in the World*, and we see that the diacritical advertisement of Delilah as the mammy relies on parallels to the Aunt Jemima story. The first is Delilah’s work reference, namely “Cunnel Glasgow” from “Richmon’,” Virginia (Hurst *Imitation* 75), undoubtedly a reappearance of Wright’s “Colonel Higbee.” The second is when Bea decides to join the First Church Fair, undoubtedly an echo of the “World’s Fair: Columbian Exposition,” which took place in Chicago in 1893 (cf. p. 20 in this thesis), and the event where Nancy Green made her first appearance as Aunt Jemima. Thirdly, where the R. T. Davis Milling Company set their booth up as a barrel-shaped display at the fair, Bea plays on elements from her ownership of the product itself. In true Aunt Jemima style, Bea decides to shape the booth like a Pullman train

car. As previously discussed, the booth – an almost exact copy of the kitchen in the plantation’s big house – becomes a confirmation of Delilah’s role as the mammy. By copying this kitchen, both in the physical interior and the “downright soothing” spirit that it evokes (Hurst *Imitation* 109), Bea offers the consumers a recreation of the utopian Old South from which the mammy was born. The Old South and the mammy, however, are both fantasies, and Bea’s recreation becomes a utopian illusion, a dreamscape.

Bea adds several other characteristics to Delilah’s position in the centre of her dreamscape; all of which portray her as a shadow of Aunt Jemima. By using waffles as merchandise, as well as syrup, the “Aunt Delilah” (Hurst *Imitation* 126) story clearly is the very embodiment of the mammy character. Bea’s framing of Delilah nonetheless produces a more flattering image than Chris Rutt’s portrayal of Aunt Jemima did. His displays a mammy whose grin is animalistic and plays upon the dehumanization of African Americans (cf. fig. 3, p. 24 in this thesis), whereas Bea’s vision of Delilah is the mentioned “fluted white cap, and her great fluted white smile” (Hurst *Imitation* 86). By adding these little facets to Delilah’s characteristic Bea nevertheless enforces the “reappearance of the underlying script” (Dillon “Reinscribing” 245). Subsequently, the “mammy manuscript” is evoked both for the “B. Pullman” products’ consumers and the novel’s readers.

While Bea enjoys her success from the “B. Pullman” products, Delilah does not experience the same. Rather, while Bea’s staging gives rise to her own success, it also underlines the racial inequalities of Hurst’s time. Delilah is pushed further down the social ladder – so far down that her exploited status approximates a situation that echoes slavery. In the announcement that “Delilah’s Hearts were on the market” (Hurst *Imitation* 88), the apostrophe tells us that the hearts belong to Delilah, and that a part of her is for sale. “Delilah’s Hearts” becomes a synecdoche for her whole person, her whole body, functioning as an echo of how humans, more specifically slave labour, were placed on the market for sale. For it is in

fact Delilah who enables Bea's "SPECTACULAR RISE FROM TINY WAFFLE SHOP TO AN INSTITUTION" (151); it is Delilah's baked goods that bring in the big money. The result of the business is a successful white woman, resting on the labour of her African American maid and functioning as an allegory of the Old South.

This "ghostly trace" (Dillon "Reinscribing" 244) of slavery adds further meaning to Bea's ascent into wealth. It also means that Delilah's role as a Northern 1930s' mammy is reduced to one of the antebellum South, as is illustrated by the visual representation of her descent in Stahl's adaptation. Suddenly the 1930s North, with all its mass-produced pancakes and New Woman Ideal, seems a little less progressive than at first sight. Taking Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* into the equation, the difference between the two 1930s' depictions of the mammy illuminates an important aspect of Hurst's novel: where Mitchell's novel nostalgically portrays the Old South, Hurst's can be read as the offering of a subtle critique of the racial hierarchy which still existed in the non-Jim Crow North during her own time.

My reading consequently proposes an understanding of the novel as a throwback of Delilah to the antebellum mammy figure, and, as such, it can be seen as an indirect critique of the racial inequalities of Hurst's time. What Hurst's text does, then, by bringing the original script to the surface, is to work against the mammy stereotype's "status quo" (Abraham and Torok 125) by making visible the inequalities between this fantasy and the New Woman Ideal, another "fantasy." The display is a subtle one, and Hurst attempts to make audible the voice for the destruction of the fantasy's maintenance. In other words, she does like Bettye Saar would do almost forty years later: exhibit her protest.

I have thus far explored the *representation* of the character of Delilah as a mammy figure. As we have seen, a "reappearance of the underlying script" (Dillon "Reinscribing" 245) of the mammy fantasy is visible in *Imitation of Life*. The exaggeration of Delilah's features all

portray her as a mammy figure, and in Bea's dreamscape, these features are further strengthened. It is therefore safe to say that Hurst's Delilah figure is haunted by the stereotype created by the white representation of her as a kind of national mammy. However, as we shall see, Delilah attempts to take control over this framing and portray herself as a mother rather than a mammy.

2.2.3. Mammy Fights Back

A resistance towards being staged as a mammy stereotype is detectable in Delilah early on in the novel. The first sign occurs during the "photoshoot" of Delilah for the cover of the boxes of "Delilah's Hearts." As already mentioned, Bea's vision of the fluted smile and hat is heavily diacritical. Delilah, on the other hand, feels that:

[t]his heah ain't no rig for to have your picture taken in. Maybe you doan' believe it, Miss Honey-Bea, but I's forgot moh about style dan de niggahs in dis heah jay-walkin' town ever knowed. Please, Miss Bea, honey, ain't you gonna let me wear mah hat dat ole Mrs. Wynkoop down in Richmon' give me for to git mahself married in? I want to keep record for mah chile of how her mammy looked – (Hurst *Imitation* 87)

Clearly, Delilah does not agree with Bea's staging, and feels more comfortable in her own headdress. Although the fluted cap is not the stereotypical colourful bandanna of Aunt Jemima, Delilah's protests tell us that she would rather prefer to be in control of her own representation than to be under the control of Bea. Interestingly, we shall see that Delilah's fight for her own representation is visible through her communication with, and relations to, Peola. Peola is the motivation for Delilah's protests: she wants her daughter to remember her as a *mother* and not a mammy. Of course, the ambivalence of the word "mammy," as used by Delilah, is painful in this context; as we shall see, Peola does not see Delilah as mother, but rather as mammy.

Secretly, Delilah attempts to convey to Peola a very progressive view of racial hierarchy as a social construction and not a biological fact: “‘Tain’t no use mah chile tryin’ to get herself raised on de idea all men is equal. Maybe dey is in de eyes of de Lawd, but it’s de eyes of man I’s talkin ‘bout” (Hurst *Imitation* 100). In this lie feelings of bitterness, as Delilah declares that racial hierarchy is a system based on inequality for African Americans. Her own view of being African American is that “[d]ar is good happiness in bein’ black” (150), and what she specifically attempts to teach her daughter is to take pride in her African American ancestry and not hide it. She encourages Peola to accept herself, as it is the best gift a mother can give to her daughter in such a culture. Delilah consequently removes herself from the original mammy, who, in the fantasy, was a strong upholder of white superiority.

But as we know, Delilah’s view of Peola as an African American is not shared by Peola herself. Early on, Peola distances herself from her mother both by passing as white at school, as well as by rejecting Delilah’s vernacular: “From her very infancy, Peola, quick as any child to ape, was nevertheless careful to avoid replica of her parent’s diction” (Hurst *Imitation* 98). But Delilah sees Peola’s light skin colour as “a curse on her (...)” because it makes her hate “to be black” and be “[s]hamed to be what the Lawd made her” (120). In other words, Delilah is troubled by the knowledge that her daughter does not accept herself as she is. She regards her daughter’s blood to be the determinative factor in the decision that “[w]e’s black, me and mah baby” (76). Delilah thus attempts to inscribe her daughter as African American, which Peola desperately resists.

The problem is, however, that in the house, Delilah is hired as maid, and must act according to the mammy image. Her role requires her to treat Jessie and Peola differently, as the fantasy and the dreamscape expects her to “naturally prefer” her white child over her biological one (cf. p. 16-17 in this thesis). But Delilah takes this role too seriously, and when the two girls misbehave by sticking pins in Mr. Chipley, the favouring of the white Jessie is

taken to the extreme. Even in the physical reprimanding of the two girls, the line of order is determined according to race: “Stop pushin’, Peola. You cain’t git your ear twisted befoh white chile has had her’n” (Hurst *Imitation* 97). The discrimination sees no limits, and when Peola attempts to apologize, her mother again chastises her: “Peola, will you stop bein’ sorry before Jessie is sorry? Ain’t you got no way of keepin’ yourself in your place?” (100). Of course, Delilah takes her role so seriously – to the extreme – that the scene becomes comical. Nonetheless, it highlights the fact that she is expected to perform in the role as mammy, which requires her to treat her own daughter as an inferior – the exact opposite of what she encourages Peola to think of herself as, as an African American. Consequently, Delilah’s mammy role obliterates and eclipses her *maternal* message to Peola.

In every scene where Peola and Delilah are in contact, Delilah is trapped in the representation as mammy. The mammy role erases her role as a mother, however much she struggles to enforce and display it. The much stronger white framing of Delilah as a mammy subsequently blinds Peola’s vision of her mother. Delilah is *mother* when communicating the progressive view of self-acceptance, but when acting as *mammy*, the meaning of her message changes to a support of racial hierarchy and an encouragement for Peola to embrace the inferior status as an African American.

Let us again return to the fantasy of the mammy figure. As we have seen, Delilah endeavours to take charge over her own portrayal by attempting to make her role as mother speak louder than the fantasy, or her role as mammy. This attempt to work against the fantasy’s “status quo” by breaking out of the representation and taking control over it can be read as a hope to improve and re-orient the mammy figure. However, the fantasy’s representation of Delilah as mammy is, as we remember, white; and, according to racial hierarchy, it is stronger than Delilah’s own representation. This is also played out in her very performance. When Delilah’s message of self-acceptance becomes obliterated by her role as a mammy, it is

perceived as a support of racial hierarchy. We remember from Chapter 1 that the antebellum mammy figure was a strong upholder of racial hierarchy. This was displayed both in her faithfulness for her white owners, as well as in the love for the white child. When Peola does not hear her mother's message the way Delilah means it to be perceived, Delilah's inscription as a mammy figure is strengthened. The struggle to emancipate herself from her own representation is lost and, simultaneously, the fantasy's "status quo" is confirmed.

From Peola's point of view, the fact that her mother encourages her to be black, simultaneously as she favours the white child, becomes an encouragement to embrace inferiority. Peola's solution to her problem is a strong reaction to her mother's failure to break out of the captivity of her representation. Refusing to be labelled as African American, she instead embraces the one chance she has to live a better life by crossing the colour line and marrying a white man. So radically does she remove herself from her mother as a mammy figure that she in fact breaks all ties with her and moves to Bolivia. Peola's solution becomes her own little American Dream by reinvention, and she erases her past by overwriting it.

Interesting here is the fact that Peola subsequently falls into another stereotype: the tragic mulatto. Typically, this stereotypical character dies tragically, often by suicide, and often as a consequence of the choice of passing (Pilgrim "The Tragic Mulatto Myth"). Nella Larsen's character of Clare Kendry in *Passing* is one such stereotype. She crosses the colour line and marries a white man who is unaware of her race. Just before being confronted by her husband, who has found out her secret, Clare falls out from a sixth story window and into her death. Whether or not this is suicide is unclear, but her death nonetheless relieves her from her "punishment." Peola does not die at the end of Hurst's novel, but her escape from the chance of being revealed is perhaps even more extreme. The only threat of being exposed as African American is having children. To avoid this situation, she chooses to sterilize herself. This does

not equal Clare's death, but the sterilization nonetheless stops her bloodline, and in effect erases her history and any possibility of having a legacy¹³.

2.3. Conclusion

In his introduction to the 2004 edition of *Imitation of Life*, Daniel Itzkovitz states that *Imitation of Life* “refuses to resolve its dilemmas – dilemmas that still haunt America in the 21st century – with simple and satisfying answers” (xxxviii). I wish to bring my reading in as a possible solution to one of the most challenging dilemmas, namely the problem of representation. The threat of the white representation is indeed central in the novel, and both Delilah and Peola attempt to break free from their “captivity” – Delilah from the mammy stereotype and Peola from what she understands as her mother forcing her into an inferior position as an African American. We saw above that Peola opts out and cuts all ties to her heritage; for Delilah, however, the conclusion is more intricate.

As mentioned in the introduction, Sterling Brown argues that *Imitation of Life* plays upon the “old stereotype of the contented Mammy” (88, qtd. in Caputi 701). But this argument does not do justice to the complexity of the novel. The novel arguably presents Delilah as the proprietor of the mammy role, and a modern one at that. The reference to the first election of Woodrow Wilson as US President sets the novel in the early 1910s, the Progressive Era, and this is reflected in the fact that the mammy is the business partner of her white employer. Arguably, then, Delilah has come a long way since the days of the stereotypical antebellum mammy. However, my reading suggests that from this improvement, the novel excavates an unexpected presence of an assumed absence: traces of the original mammy. Subtle as they may be, these traces lead back to what are such persistent layers of history that the stereotype shines through and dominates the reader's impressions.

¹³ While Peola is one of the most complex characters in the novel, and an exploration of her would be highly interesting, the focus on this thesis does not allow for further discussions.

In order to illustrate this persistence of history I will focus on one scene in particular, namely Delilah's death, and her final, desperate attempt to be inscribed as mother:

At six o'clock in the morning, on a pallet two doctors and John managed to contrive for her on the floor, Delilah, lifting herself out of a hypodermic-induced sleep, begin suddenly to pour hot broad kisses against the bare ankles of Bea, who stood by.

In that act, she died. (Hurst *Imitation* 276)

The use of words here is interesting. As we have established, Delilah's position in the role as mammy is not natural from her own side; it is staged. In this scene, we witness Delilah's attempt to be acknowledged according to her own identity through a continuous negotiation of her role. As is only "right" for a mammy, she is now placed on the floor, the lowest position. Her attempt to lift herself up can be read as a final attempt to break out of her inferior role. But the mammy role is too insistent – too dominant – and she is forced back down into the servant position, symbolized by the kissing of Bea's feet – a very strong imagery. The word "act" in the final sentence makes the performance, and the imitation, clear. However, it is in this image she dies, trapped, and the mammy representation once and for all takes control over Delilah.

When Nancy Green, the first personification of Aunt Jemima, died, she was denied the right to her own identity in the newspapers. In *Imitation of Life*, we hear a sinister echo of this control of memory through representation. When Delilah dies, one press statement reads: "WAFFLE QUEEN WHOSE FACE IS KNOWN TO MILLIONS DIES IN HOME OF B. PULLMAN" (Hurst *Imitation* 268). Simultaneously, one newspaper statement on Nancy Green's death was "1923, Aunt Jemima, 89, and jolly as ever, died in a car accident" (Gannett News, qtd. in Manring *Slave* 78). It is clear that Delilah, as Nancy Green, will be remembered as a mammy figure only.

Dillon states that the palimpsest “offers the reassurance that erasure and death, even if they appear permanent, can always be reversed – that nothing can properly and truly ‘die’” (“Reinscribing” 246). In the dialogue between the “underlying script” (245), or the “mammyscript,” and the overlying one of the nuanced and progressive mammy, something happens. Despite the nuanced mammy’s improved portrayal, the character of Delilah is nevertheless constructed upon the fantasy of the mammy figure, and thus the underlying traces of her original manuscript will shine through. Such is the dramatic consequences of the palimpsest: the attempt of erasure will not succeed. Very little has changed: in Hurst’s 1930s North, racial hierarchy is very much alive, and thus the white representation takes control not only over the portrayal of Delilah as a mammy figure, but also the attempt to criticize racial inequality. The representation is too strong, and the mammy, in the character of Delilah, remains a travelling image that continues to “shape cultural and, inevitably, human memory of events” (Vågnes 148).

2.4. Post-Delilah Representations of the Mammy Figure



Fig. 7: Louise Beavers as Beulah in one of the show’s episodes. Source: Billy Ingram. “Beulah” *Tvparty.com*. Web. 15 Jan. 2015.

Before exploring the so far most recent layer in the “mammy palimpsest,” namely the stereotyped Latina nanny, a short outline of other mammy portrayals of the twentieth century is necessary. Not much has changed after Hurst’s and other representations in literature and popular culture, for several of these mammy figures display very stereotypical traits. Perhaps most striking is the character of “Beulah” in the TV-series with the same name. The series ran from 1950-53, and revolves around the Henderson family and their housekeeper,

Beulah, who is known as the “queen of the kitchen” and the family’s problem solver (“African American Studies Research Guide: Radio & TV Shows”). Several actresses played the role of Beulah, and interestingly, some of them were not new to the mammy role. Hattie McDaniel played Beulah for almost two years, and can also be seen in the character of “Mammy” in the 1939 film adaptation of Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind*. Louise Beavers was the final Beulah, and she also played Delilah in Stahl’s 1934 film adaptation of *Imitation of Life*. Fig. 7 displays Beavers in one of the episodes, and, as we can see, she fits Kimberly Wallace-Sanders’s description of the typical mammy with “[h]er large dark body and her round smiling face” (2). Clearly, Beulah is “part of the family.”

In the 1950s, a novel was published which enabled the domestic worker to write against her stereotypical portrayal. In Alice Childress’s *Like One of the Family: Conversations from a Domestic’s Life* (1956), originally published as a series of columns in a newspaper called *Freedom* (Harris xxiv), we meet Mildred. In addition to being the novel’s narrator and protagonist, she is a domestic worker in New York City who shares her honest views. Mildred makes an effort to portray herself as anything but the mammy stereotype by displaying strong reflections around race in the novel’s many stories. Especially interesting is her assessment of the portrayal of the domestic worker in popular culture. In movies, she says, “they’re not pinnin’ as many bandana hand-kerchiefs on our heads these days, but they get the same result in other ways” (Childress 126). The costumes might be improved, “but when you boil everything down to the nitty-gritty she’ll be talkin’ the same old line!” (126). Mildred’s critique of portrayals of domestic workers can be seen in relation to the palimpsest reading of *Imitation of Life* and Delilah. Although the very stereotypical features are presumably gone, the “ghostly traces” are still there. The figure is thus nonetheless the same, and the portrayal is still white and one-sided. Mildred’s response to this dominating representation is a fresh breath of air in the literary body of mammies.

Childress's novel belongs to a new direction in the representation of the mammy figure. At the end of the 1950s, the Civil Rights movement set a stop to the large-scale domination of the mammy stereotype. A more nuanced version entered the literary field, such as the Harper Lee's classic *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960). The character of Calpurnia is the Finch family's black cook, and according to Scout, the youngest member of the family, she is "all angles and bones" (Lee 6). Calpurnia's body subsequently does not correspond with the stereotypical mammy's appearance. Her strict hand and strong morals nonetheless tell us that traces of the original manuscript are present, and she arguably cares very much for the children in the white Finch family. Calpurnia's two different dialects point in the direction that she "lead[s] a double life" (143): around the Finch family's house she speaks what she refers to as "white-folks' talk," whereas in her own community, her dialect is "colored-folks' talk" (143). Alexandra, the Southern belle-like aunt of the children, questions Calpurnia's influence on the children, and attempts to make her brother, Atticus, fire her. Atticus's response confirms her importance: "She's a faithful member of this family" (156). The stereotypical traits are weakened, but the domestic worker still holds the mammy's place as "part of the family"¹⁴.

Despite the new direction in the portrayal of maids and nannies, the mammy stereotype survives. In 2009 we again encounter her in Kathryn Stockett's bestseller *The Help*, more precisely in the characters of Aibileen and Minny. Aibileen functions as the maternal and affectionate side of the mammy, represented by her warmth and care for Mae Mobley, the daughter of the family for whom she works. Minny, on the other hand, displays the stern side of the mammy. In a synthesized collaboration between these two characters, an echo of the mammy figure is reshaped according to Stockett's 21st century mix of childhood memory and fantasy.

¹⁴ Also interesting in relation to the nuanced mammy portrayal are the character of Dilsey in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and Pauline in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970). For a full overview, see Wallace-Sanders, whose work concentrates on the mammy stereotype in twentieth century literature. My project differs in the way in which it aims to locate the mammy stereotype in contemporary Latina literature as well.

Stockett reveals how the novel came to be in an interview with Allison Gang (“9/11 spurred author to create ‘The Help’”). Living on Manhattan when disaster struck on 9/11, Stockett longed back to her childhood in Jackson, Mississippi during the 1970s. It seems the national crisis in 2001 evoked for Stockett a need for safety from the trauma, and Demetrie was her safe haven. It is remarkable and interesting that Stockett’s sentiment echoes a 1922 publication. *Mammy’s Letters* (1922) by G. Langhorne is a small collection of letters from her “old ex-slave Mammy” as well as stories and “incidents related by her”; all written down by Langhorne herself. Langhorne’s memories of Mammy are summarized in one passage: “Mother, Home and Mammy! They are three of the most beautiful words in the English language.” These feelings are re-experienced by Stockett almost a century later, and the day after 9/11 she started writing her novel in the comforting voice of Demetrie, her grandmother’s African American maid. When the novel was published eight years later, the characters of Aibileen and Minny encapsulate the image of Demetrie, “the dear companion to the young Stockett” (Gang), and her longing for domesticity.

Stockett’s throwback to the black mammy of the segregated South is in one way somewhat surprising. The governing contemporary literature concerning domestic workers today does not schematize the black mammy; rather, in the role of the contemporary maid or nanny we most often find a Latina. This character functions as a very different overlaying than the one we have seen in Fannie Hurst’s *Imitation of Life*, Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* and Kathryn Stockett’s *The Help*. However, we shall find that literature that features the contemporary domestic worker, the doméstica, actually tends to echo this surprise, and hence does not manage to escape the “underlying script.” In the following, we shall trace the “mammyscript” in the representation of the Latina nanny in *My Hollywood* (2010) by Mona Simpson, *Living Out* (2005) by Lisa Loomer and *América’s Dream* (1997) by Esmeralda Santiago.

3. Tracing the “Mammyscript” in Contemporary Domestic Literature

3.1. Introduction

In Lisa Loomer’s play *Living Out* we meet Ana, who searches for a position as nanny. After a round of interviews she finds a job with Nancy, a thirty-something, new mother, and her husband Richard. Ana is hired to take care of their baby daughter, Jenna. Nancy starts off with a very liberal attitude to her nanny, but after consulting her other housewife friends, Nancy is taught that domestic workers cannot necessarily be trusted and that she must “test” their reliability. This she does by leaving money on the kitchen counter to see if Ana steals them. This suspicion of dishonesty does not prevent Nancy from using her own immoral ways of exploiting Ana’s inferior position in their work relationship. When Nancy one night asks Ana to stay longer so that she herself can work, Ana is unable to meet Nancy’s request; however, Nancy pushes Ana to agree by offering her friendship: “Well, could you possibly just do me a – favor? Just this one time? (...) As a ... a friend?” (Loomer 56). Ana hesitantly agrees to stay late, and Nancy happily confirms that she is “really part of the family now” (57).

For readers who are unfamiliar with the play, it may come as a surprise that it is not set in the mid-1900s, but in the early 21st century. Ana is not a large, “content” African American

woman with a colourful bandanna around her head; she is Ana Hernandez, a Salvadoran immigrant in her early thirties. In fact, when exploring the domestic worker in contemporary literature and popular culture, a character like Ana is what we find. Her cooking is no longer primarily Southern; her cooking is really no longer especially prominent. Gone is the African American vernacular; present is the broken English of a Latin American immigrant. Her body has also undergone a transfiguration: it is no longer large and obese, but rather voluptuous. Her skin colour is no longer black; it is brown. She is the *Latina nanny*, the *doméstica*¹⁵.

The change in representation from the mammy to Latina *doméstica* can be traced in history. During the 1950s and 60s, the majority of domestic workers across the U.S. were African American women; however, by the 1970s, a shift had happened (Hondagneu-Sotelo 16). Due to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, many public-sector positions became available for African American women, and those who did not move on to such jobs were by the 70s quite old (16). The next generation refused to enter occupations that were so often associated with white domination and its roots in slavery (16), and the need for replacers grew. The Immigration Act of 1965 ended the “national origins quota,” i.e. the selection of immigrants granted admission to the U.S., and opened up for more immigration from the Western Hemisphere (Massey and Pren 1). Asians, who prior to this were unwelcome, also started immigrating and often filled domestic worker positions (1). The Act also meant a decrease in the number of legal immigrants from Latin America, which prior to 1965 had no numerical limit for immigration to the U.S., except some “qualitative restrictions” (2). The result was an increase in the number of illegal immigrants (2), and by the 1970s, Latinas dominated domestic worker positions in the U.S. (Hondagneu-Sotelo 17).

¹⁵ The term “*doméstica*” is borrowed from Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo’s study on Latina domestic workers in the Los Angeles area. The term is also used by Yajaira M. Padilla, who more specifically defines the *doméstica* as a “Latina or Latin American immigrant maid and/or nanny” (41).

This also had its repercussions for representations of the domestic worker. While half a century ago the nanny or maid in popular culture would be African American, we now typically see a Latina in such a role. She is often present in the background of the action, although occasionally her role is more prominent. The earliest examples retrievable are found in the soap series *Dallas*, where Marina Rice played the character of Angela from 1983-6 and Roseanna Christiansen played Teresa from 1982-1991, both domestic workers (“Dallas (1978-1991) Full Cast & Crew”). In more recent times we find, among many others, the character of Rosario Inés Consuelo Yolanda Salazar in *Will & Grace* (1998-2006), Flor Moreno in the film *Spanglish* (2004), Lupita in the TV-series *Weeds* (2005-2012), Edna in *Dads* (2013-2014), Esperanza in *The Comeback* (2014), and last but not least, every single one of the maids in the TV-series *Devious Maids* (2013).

Like the mammy figure, the contemporary Latina doméstica of popular culture is also a stereotype. In the last-mentioned TV-series *Devious Maids*, several of the maids have voluptuous bodies which are very much played upon and emphasized. This is in itself a stereotypical trait (Habell-Pallán 69) which subsequently works to portray the maids as threats to the marital harmony of their employers. The figuration of the Latina can be traced back to 1930s and 40s Western movie and its stereotypes. Charles Ramírez Berg lists six Hispanic Hollywood film stereotypes, and two of them, namely the “Halfbreed Harlot” and the “Dark Lady” (113, 15), remind us of the maids. Although the “devious maids” do not coincide with these figures in every aspect, such as the Halfbreed Harlot’s mixed race and her personal choice of being a prostitute, or the Dark Lady’s aristocratic background, they are nonetheless portrayed with several of these figures’ stereotypical qualities, such as voluptuousness, sensuality, and a talent for seduction (113-15).

The most important aspect of the Latina maids in popular culture today is, however, that they assume to represent all Latinas in general. *Devious Maids* underwent massive criticism for

its perpetuation of this representation in the show (*The Huffington Post*, Thomas). Executive producer, Eva Longoria, states that the series aims to disprove a common perception of Latinas: “The stereotype we are grappling with here is that as Latinas, *all* we are is maids. And yet, this is a show that deconstructs the stereotype by showing us that maids are so much more.” Sadly, stories of these Latinas’ immigrant backgrounds do not receive as much focus as the series’ focus on appearance, the Latinas’ bodies, and the threat of seduction.

However, despite the series’ shortcomings in highlighting the fact that the “five women are maids by occupation only; it is what they do, not who they are” (Longoria), the intention behind the production is important. It also brings forth a very important point that I would like to focus on in this chapter’s exploration of the contemporary domestic worker in literature, namely the literary and cultural representation of the *doméstica*. Professor of sociology Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo states that despite the fact that popular culture typically depicts Latinas as maids, less than 10 percent of the 153 *domésticas* she interviewed at bus stops in Los Angeles had worked as domestics before immigrating to the U.S. (29). These women were in their home countries in fact not poor; if they were they would not be able to migrate (29). Thus, it is clear that the representation of Latinas as domestics and domestics only in popular culture does not shed light on the totality of the situations of real-life Latinas.

At the same time, as often happens, stereotypes filter into reality. Patssi Valdez, artist and founding member of the art collective “Asco” which protested against the representation of Chicana and Latina stereotypes in media during the 1960s, recalls how her teacher in home economics instructed her “to pay real good attention since she was going to end up cooking and cleaning in someone’s house” (*ASCO Means Nausea in Spanish: A 13-Minute Documentary*, qtd. in Habell-Pallán 75). The very bigoted view expressed here illustrates a certain *expectation* of Latinas as domestic workers, and domestic workers only. The expectation to a fictional stereotype as pertaining to reality is in itself a scary echo, or even repetition, of what happened

to African American domestics during the Jim Crow era. As we remember from Chapter 2, the real-life domestic worker was pushed into the mammy role, precisely by their employers' expectations of a domestic worker who functioned as a symbol of the Old South's traditions (Susan Tucker 43). Fannie Hurst's character of Delilah Johnston was indeed placed under this very pressure to act according to the mammy stereotype – an expectation which in turn limited her possibility of visualizing her own persona.

In this chapter, I shall explore the figure of the *doméstica* as a possible heiress to the mammy figure in literature. There are, however, not many literary works to choose from that focus on the domestic worker of the 21st century. Of the few existing works I have found, this chapter will focus on three, namely the already mentioned play *Living Out* (2003) by Lisa Loomer, Mona Simpson's novel *My Hollywood* (2010) and Esmeralda Santiago's *América's Dream*¹⁶ (1996). As with Hurst's character of Delilah, several of the *domésticas* in these works find themselves in a hierarchy where their inferior positions place upon them certain expectations, and a pressure to respond to these expectations. As already hinted at, it is here we find remaining traces of the mammy figure in its literary figuration.

Mona Simpson's novel *My Hollywood* offers the reader a narrative structure which alternates between Claire Berend, a white, middle-class composer and new mother, and her nanny, Lola – a 50-something Filipina immigrant. Claire struggles to manage both her job and her new role as a mother for her son William, and feels she succeeds in neither. She does not find much support in her husband, Paul, who spends most of his time at work, and they hire Lola as nanny because Claire “liked the way she looked. She was small, dark, well joined” (Simpson 11). For Claire, Lola becomes a safe haven in the trauma of motherhood: she

¹⁶ A note must be made on this work. Santiago's novel cannot, in my opinion, be characterized as neither a “deep” nor particularly interesting piece of literature. Its plot and characters are flat, simple, and one-dimensional. However, as we shall see, the novel does contain a few interesting aspects in relation to the focus of this chapter, and of this thesis, for that matter. For this reason, the other works will be in focus and Santiago's novel will function as a support for my arguments.

appreciates, values and respects Lola's presence. Lola has five children in the Philippines for whom she pays tuition by working as a nanny in Santa Monica. She is highly praised in the nanny community, and does a good job. However, despite her competence, she is fired by Claire and Paul a few years after William starts school, since his teachers "don't think [Lola] can really control him" (256). Up to this point Lola has also worked as nanny for the Grant family. When she is fired by Claire, she asks for a full-time position with the Grants, but they decline. Lola then starts to work with a single mother named Judith, who needs help with her new-born daughter. Judith does not cope well with motherhood, and Lola becomes very close with her daughter: it is Lola who gives her the name of Laura and takes her to doctor appointments. She stays with the little family for six years, before being fired because she refuses to iron for Judith's new boyfriend. Lola goes back to the Philippines but soon finds that her children, all grown up, no longer need her. Her husband Bong Bong has had a girlfriend while she has been away. Suddenly, one day, Claire shows up and asks her to come back. Judith and the boyfriend have broken up, and Lola is needed. Lola returns to the U.S.

Lisa Loomer's *Living Out* is a short play which pinpoints the many aspects of working as a domestic worker as well as employing one in the contemporary U.S.¹⁷ The domestic workers are all from Latin American countries, and all of their employers are Anglo Americans. Like Simpson's novel, the structure of the play enables the audience to see and hear both sides of the situation. As the publisher's review of the play reads, it "looks at the prejudices and misconceptions between Anglos and Latinos. How do we make someone "the other"? What is the cost of doing so?" (Dramatists Play Service). Ana, one of the protagonists, is an illegal immigrant from El Salvador, and married to Bobby. She has two sons, Santiago who is with them in Los Angeles, and Tomás who is in El Salvador with Ana's mother. In order to get the job with Nancy, Ana is forced to lie and say that both her sons are in El Salvador. This is, in

¹⁷ The play premiered in Los Angeles 18 January 2003.

the end, what causes her to lose her job. As already mentioned, Ana is pressured by Nancy to work late one evening so that she can attend a work related dinner. This means that Ana is unable to pick up Santiago from his football practice, and she asks her sister-in-law to do it. The two of them are involved in a car accident, and Santiago dies. When Ana is informed of the accident, she is unable to reach Nancy and Richard. She takes Jenna with her to the hospital. When Nancy and Richard arrive home, they panic when they cannot find their daughter in the apartment, and fear that Ana has kidnapped her. The action jumps ahead in time, and the other characters – both domestic workers and employers – talk about what “really” happened after Ana left the apartment. They report rumours about Ana’s dishonesty: driving without a valid license with Jenna in the car, her lack of citizenship, her son who was in Los Angeles after all. All of these reports represent her as lying and deceitful, and do not take into consideration the fact that these are all lies Ana was forced to tell in order to get the job, in order to make a living.

In *América’s Dream* by Esmeralda Santiago we meet 29-year old América who works as a maid at a hotel on the Puerto Rican island of Vieques. She lives with her mother, Ester, and her 14-year-old daughter, Rosalinda. Rosalinda’s father, Correa, has married another woman, but nonetheless upholds his physically and sexually abusive relationship with América. When América one day is offered to go to New York to work as a live-in nanny with a family she has met at the hotel, she sees it as an opportunity to escape Correa, and accepts. Despite her first months of solitude and difficulties in communicating due to her limited English skills, her new life with the Leverett family in Westchester County, New York, is a relief for América. She meets other “empleadas,” who share their experiences with the job, and she contacts her aunt in the Bronx. The idyll is broken when Correa finds out where she is, and comes for her. He breaks into the Leverett house and attempts to kill her; however, she kills him. The novel ends with Rosalinda coming and living with her mother in an apartment in the Bronx, and América starts working as a maid in a Manhattan hotel.

As we gather already from the synopses of these texts, the representation of Latinas/Filipinas is a repetition of what we have seen in the preceding chapters concerning the African American woman in the role as the mammy. In order to understand better this aspect of repetition, we may turn to the concept of *trace*. Leonard Lawlor explains Derrida's understanding of *trace* as a "minimal repeatability found in every experience"; it is "a kind of proto-linguisticity (Derrida also calls it "arche-writing"), since language in its most minimal determination consists in repeatable forms." This notion of trace as a small *repetition*, both by "what has passed away and is no longer present *and* what is about to come and is not yet present" (Lawlor, italics in original), is precisely how the mammy figure is recreated in contemporary literature. We shall see that in this sense – in the notion of "what is about to come," an anticipated presence – the creation of the revitalization of the mammy figure in the literary works at hand works as a co-construction of the mammy figure and the doméstica.

In Loomer's *Living Out*, even the dramaturgy illuminates the aspect of repetition by trace. Act 1, scene 2 includes both Ana and Bobby, and Nancy and Richard, and illustrates the intersecting of two "parallel worlds" (Loomer 3): "*The scenes on the Eastside and the Westside [of Los Angeles] are simultaneous, and at times overlap, but each woman clearly speaks to her own husband*" (*Living Out*, Act 1, Scene 2, italics in original). The focus shifts between the two couples and highlights their very different ways of living in the same city, on the same scene, in different classes. Ana and Bobby discuss the repercussions Ana's job will have for her relationship with her son, how she will not be able to see him much. Nancy and Richard simultaneously discuss trivial matters such as how to refer to Ana – as nanny, babysitter or caregiver? Their discussion evolve into an argument on whether or not it is too soon for Nancy to go back to work, whereupon Nancy argues that "a good pre-school costs nine thousand a year" (*Living out*, Act 1, Scene 2). The focus then shifts more rapidly, and only one character in each couple speaks at a time. This scenography illustrates their different focuses: Ana and

Bobby focus their discussion on how they are going to get by, how to manage to spend time with their son, while Nancy and Richard plan how they, and Jenna, will succeed, ascend, rise in society. The previously discussed image from John M. Stahl's movie adaptation on *Imitation of Life* (fig. 6) is evoked: the situation between Ana, domestic worker and "non-white," and Nancy, employer, businesswoman and white, is repeated without the visual aid of the stairs conjuring the social ladder. Abraham and Torok's thoughts on the fantasy's "preservation of the *status quo*" are relevant: the intersection between the two families in the play illuminates traces of the fantasy, which does not seem to have progressed or developed at all since we saw her in Chapter 2 (125). As we will see, such a form of repetition is constructed in all three texts, and thus the domésticas' employers recreate a version of the mammy figure, or fantasy, according to an expected and desired presence in their *own* fantasy.

The emphasis on "minimal repeatability" is important, since the mammy stereotype and the doméstica are not the *same* figure. They are two different representations, or stereotypical and fictional reflections, of how their respective time periods view the majority group of domestic workers. Between the two representations of the mammy and the doméstica thus lies an unmapped space which contains lingering traces of earlier times. In order to map this space, I would like to again turn to Sarah Dillon and her thoughts on the palimpsest. In Chapter 2, a palimpsest reading of *Imitation of Life* highlighted the text's "resurrection of the underlying script" of the fabric of the palimpsest (Dillon "Reinscribing" 253). In other words, what I termed the "mammyscript" rose to the surface of the novel and eclipsed, erased Delilah's own representation by an overlaying of her figure as the stereotypical mammy figure. Dillon explains a palimpsest reading as one that separates the surfaces, overwritings, overlayings, from what has been attempted erased, from the "underlying script." In other words, it reads them separately, in isolation, to "reduce the text to a single layer" (Dillon *The Palimpsest* 48).

In relation to the contemporary literary portrayal of the doméstica, however, such a reading would mean ignoring the traces and continuities that persists in cultural representation.

A *palimpsestuous* reading, on the other hand, will not face the risk of overlooking any layer of the texts. Such a reading enables us to locate the connections between the layers, between the two figures, and find “the complex relationality of the different texts which constitute their fabric” (Dillon “Reinscribing, 256). The doméstica has indeed no relation to the mammy figure; except from a common occupation, they are different in appearance, ethnicity, history, and more. The doméstica is a different stereotype – a new overlaying of the script, in the fantasy. Since “[t]he palimpsest is an involuted phenomenon where otherwise unrelated texts are interwoven and entangled, intricately interwoven, interrupting and inhabiting each other,” we must, rather than separate the layers, attempt to make sense of the totality in which the texts figure, and what they produce (245). A “palimpsestuous reading is an inventive process of creating relations where there may, or should, be none; hence the appropriateness of its epithet’s phonetic similarity to the incestuous” (254). In this unmapped space between the mammy in earlier representations and the Doméstica in contemporary literature we find the “palimpsestuousness” of the text: “a simultaneous relation of intimacy and separation” which preserves “the distinctness of its texts, while at the same time allowing for their essential contamination and interdependence” (Dillon *The Palimpsest* 3).

3.2. Revitalizing the “Mammyscript” in *My Hollywood, América’s Dream* and *Living Out*

What most prominently illuminates the relation between the mammy figure and the doméstica in the works of Loomer, Simpson¹⁸ and Santiago, is the expectation of and to a certain kind of

¹⁸ A note must be made on the use of the term “doméstica” in Simpson’s novel. Most of the nannies in this novel are Filipina. There are differing opinions amongst scholars and the general public on whether or not a Filipina is regarded as Latinas. Consequently, the fact that I include these characters in the term of the “doméstica,” may seem strange. However, as we shall see, the Filipina nannies fall into this category by their employers’ representations.

representation, a fantasy. Cathy Turner's thoughts on "site-specific performance" are interesting in relation to this. Turner, who combines the fields of architecture and dramaturgy, refers to the notion of "the ghost and the host" in order to "distinguish between the site itself and the ephemeral architectures that may be built within it" (373). While the host is a site, a place, the ghost is a previous inhabitant of that site which continues to haunt the site (373-4). Interestingly, the site becomes a palimpsest, haunted by its layers, as the name of "ghost" implies. In relation to the following analysis, it is useful to envision the fantasy as a site, a dreamscape, and host for ideas. While we saw in Chapter 2 the "reappearance of the underlying script" – which can be seen as the ghost's resurrection – we shall see in the exploration of contemporary literature that the site of the fantasy is receptive to new impressions and ideas. However, we find the ghost's hauntings, or "ghostly traces" (Dillon "Reinscribing" 244) of the mammy figure precisely in the representation of these new impressions and ideas¹⁹. These traces construct a repetition of the mammy figure, more specifically through several tropes. In the works at hand, these tropes cooperate in a revitalization that goes back to the fantasy of the mammy figure, and she resumes her figure in staging, framing, representation and performance. In short, the mammy figure is configured into being by expectations of and to the fantasy.

3.2.1. Being "Part of the Family"

The revitalization of the mammy figure starts with two of her very visible residues in contemporary literature. One of them is Nancy's already mentioned declaration of Ana as being "part of the family" (*Living Out* Act 2 scene 5). To speak of one's domestic workers as being "part of the family" was common during the first half of the 20th century, but as we remember from Chapter 2, it often entailed being treated as an inferior by segregation from one's

¹⁹ Of course, Gerard Genette's thoughts are logical to include in a palimpsestuous reading, and especially so the notion of hypertextuality, which is "any relationship uniting a text B (which I shall call the *hypertext*) to an earlier text A (I shall, of course, call it the *hypotext*)" (5). Dillon also finds support in Genette. However, I find that in my reading of the palimpsest at hand, Cathy Turner is more useful since she opens up for a broader interpretation of the aspect of performance according to the expectations on the site.

employer. Being “part of the family” can however be traced further back to the antebellum mammy figure in literature. The early versions of this fantasy or illusion had a “natural” preference for her white charges that surpassed the love she had for her own family (Wallace-Sanders 19). Subsequently, she was represented as more part of her white family than her own.

In *My Hollywood*, this trope is used in a similar way as in Fannie Hurst’s *Imitation of Life*. In Paul’s absence, the presence of Lola is needed. In the evenings, when William is put to bed, it is not Claire and Paul who sit down and talk about William’s day – it is Claire and Lola. Lola can thus be said to fill Paul’s void in the family structure. This conjures the discussion in Chapter 2 on Delilah’s key position in the somewhat untraditional family structure. Like Bea, who finds tremendous help in Delilah’s care for the children so that she herself can earn money, Claire finds support in Lola’s maternal abilities and manages to relax when she is around. It is clear that Claire recognizes Lola’s important position in the household; in fact, she feels that “William has two mommies” (Simpson 66). Lola is an even more important “part of the family” when she works with the single mother Judith, and her daughter Laura. It is Lola who feeds Laura, takes her to physical therapy, and invites friends over. While it can be said that Laura, too, “has two mommies,” it is perhaps closer to the truth to say that Lola is Laura’s mother figure.

A second trace of the mammy figure in contemporary literature is also found in Simpson’s novel. Ruth, one of the domesticas, receives “sheets and a dresser, hand-me downs from an employer” (Simpson 103). In the Jim Crow South, one way of upholding the inequality between domestic and employer was through “hand-me downs,” or gifts given by employers to their domestics instead of salary (van Wormer, Jackson, Sudduth 41). These “gifts” were in reality items that the employees inherited from their employers when a new item replaced the old, such as furniture, clothes or household equipment (41). In her study of Chicana domestic workers in the U.S., professor of sociology Mary Romero finds that this tradition is a kind of

“benevolent maternalism used to “buy” and “bond” the domestic”; that is, the employers’ way to prevent the maid from seeking employment elsewhere (109). The domestic is often forced to express gratitude for her employer’s act of “kindness,” and the power positions are confirmed, with white on top and domestics at the bottom (110). This practise in fact goes back to the days of slavery, when leftovers from meals were given to house servants to carry, or “tote,” to their respective families (van Wormer, Jackson, Sudduth 42). Servants depended on the generosity of their owners, who decided if the servant had earned the right to tote; thus, the imbalance in the relationship was strengthened (42). Simpson’s novel thus construes a continuity that goes back to antebellum representation. The remaining tradition of toting brings the doméstica into the fantasy, to the site, and here she meets traces of the mammy figure. She is configured into a position which is a “minimal repetition” of an old tradition between employer and African American domestic worker, but the current receiver of the “gifts” has undergone a transition. She is a new overlaying of the fantasy, but nonetheless, to this day, she is placed in a representation which where she is suggested as dependent upon the goodwill of her employer.

The use of the phrases “part of the family” and “hand-me-downs” illuminates the fact that the contemporary literary representation contains two concrete, historical traces of the mammy figure. These two traces are not hidden; they are very visible. In order to locate the other traces of the mammy figure in the works at hand, we must search not only for “surface meanings’ and ‘hidden meanings’,” for they “do not describe the operations of the palimpsest” (Benstock 350, qtd. in Dillon “Reinscribing” 257). We shall see in other tropes that the layers of the palimpsest of the mammy figure *produce* a relationality which contains traces of the mammy stereotype. The employers stage the doméstica according to the “mammyscript,” and the domésticas’ memberships in their respective white “families” entail the same as it did for the mammy figure: a strong sense of objectification. The domésticas’ own representations are erased by a staging which increases the superiority of the employers. But more dramatically,

the staging leaves the domésticas no room for agency or resistance. They must endure their superiors' staging, and conform to the elements and "ghostly traces" of a fantasy. They are rendered powerless on the site of performance.

3.2.2. The Servant Class

In *My Hollywood*, Paul's mother, who is never referred to by name, but only as "Paul's mother" and "the outlet shopper"²⁰ (Simpson 4, 310), brings with her a whisper from the past. During fourteen years of Paul's childhood, the family had a live-in nanny called Marjorie, an African American woman from Mississippi. This fact alone is a subtle hint toward her position as mammy for the family. When taking into consideration Paul's attendance in her funeral, and his tradition of sending "eighty dollars to her living daughter" every Christmas (7), it is clear that he considered his nanny an important figure in his childhood. Interestingly, Mrs Berend's view adds an important feature to Marjorie that strengthens the suggestion that she may have been a mammy figure. When telling Claire of her fear that Marjorie would not return from her annual vacations to Mississippi, Mrs Berend reveals her narrow-mindedness: "She loved the children and that's why I put up with it" (193). Mrs Berend's "enduring" of Marjorie's vacation does not seem reasonable, considering the fact that a few weeks in her home state is fair when spending the rest of the year in her live-in situation. This expectation to her maid's constant accessibility is however a typical expectation of the "superior" employer, and she demands her maid to be a servant without any needs or life of her own.

On the basis of these views, Mrs Berend advises Claire to hire a live-in nanny, since "*there's never the problem of her calling in sick*" (Simpson 7, italics in original). The doméstica is in other words regarded as labour force only, and subsequently holds an inferior status. This notion is logical considering the fact that Mrs Berend is from a time where the societal structure was very different from that of the novel's setting. During the first half of the 20th century,

²⁰ For the sake of simplicity, I will refer to this character as "Mrs Berend."

“non-white” women primarily worked as domestics, and were consequently often regarded by their employers as the “servant class.” But what is more interesting about this statement is that Mrs Berend seems to regard the doméstica the same way as she did her own Marjorie. In the mind of Mrs Berend, these two characters are the same. By failing to separate them, she inscribes the doméstica into the position of a mammy figure. Through such advice to her daughter-in-law, Mrs Berend functions as a channel through which outdated mid-20th century views of, and attitudes to, domestic workers are communicated to the present day housewife. This perspective entangles the two figures; they become, in the words of Dillon, “intricately interwoven” (*The Palimpsest* 4). As we shall see, this involution illuminates a relation that should not be, namely that the two roles construct each other, retaining their differences, while at the same time displaying some disturbing continuities and similarities in terms of stereotyping and representation.

Claire, who, unlike Paul, did not grow up under the care of a nanny, finds herself quite lost when Mrs Berend offers her the advice above: “Why not? I wondered, like an idiot. How do they not get sick?” (7). She has not seen first-hand the inequality between employer and domestic worker within a domestic sphere, and thus does not automatically treat her own nanny with prejudice and superiority. However, sadly, other characters in the novel share Mrs Berend’s perspective of the doméstica as labour and labour only, first and foremost Helen Grant. Helen’s perspective on, and way of managing motherhood, is very different from Claire’s, and offers a throwback to the mammy’s heyday. Helen stands in the middle of her domestic paradise, surrounded by her successful husband, her polite and well-behaved son, and last but not least, her nannies. Helen Grant does not work, she is a *mother*. Her husband, Jeff, is the breadwinner. Compared to Hurst’s character of Bea Pullman, who represented the New Woman Ideal of the working mother, it is clear that Helen embodies an ideal which has taken

a different direction. Helen is a 1990s embodiment of the mid-20th century American housewife, with corresponding views of her nannies.

When Helen asks Lola if she knows anyone who can fill in for a friend's nanny who is on vacation, it is because she feels Lola "knows every nanny in Santa Monica. Filipinas are great" (Simpson 229). This attempt at praise has an opposite effect as Helen fails to acknowledge the human qualities of neither Lola nor any Filipina. She sees them as nannies and nannies only, and generalizes them into a homogenous population of *domésticas*. This is in itself a scary echo of the societal structure that Mrs Berend brings with her into the novel, where the domestic, on the base of her ethnicity and skin colour, is regarded as part of the "servant class." Lola's silent reaction to Helen's statement is: "A nation of nannies, she is thinking" (229). Helen's view is underlined by Lola's internalization of it; however, Lola also displays a resistance toward Helen's generalization. Interestingly, by her subtle, but informative reaction, Lola discloses Helen's ignorant and simple way of thinking.

Helen's staging continues to force Lola into an inferior position. In a conversation with Claire, Helen expresses concern that Lola does not suit the needs of her school-aged son, Bing: "Was an immigrant nanny right for Bing *at this age*? 'I mean, she's great with flowers and ironing T-shirts but –'" (Simpson 244). Helen feels that it is Lola's immigrant status that prevents her from having anything to offer Bing as he has reached a certain level of schooling – a level Helen apparently feels that Lola has not reached. What Helen does, then, is to portray Lola as immature and infantile. Bing may not have the same need for a nanny at his age as he did as an infant; however, the fact that Helen bases this statement in Lola's immigrant status depicts her as less intelligent, simple-minded and infantile, compared to her white charge. This depiction is strengthened as Helen states that she would rather want "a college girl" (245), and in other words someone she considers to be very different from, even superior to, Lola. This condescending portrayal of Lola is underlined by Helen's conclusion that "Bing is definitely

outgrowing Lola” (245). The way in which Helen compares the fifty-something Lola with her school-aged charge on the grounds of Lola’s ethnicity becomes so exaggerated and absurd that it stands forth as comical and ignorant.

Helen’s comparison constructs a gap in intelligence between Lola on the one side, and her white charge on the other. We can see here remains of the racial hierarchy from the times of *Imitation of Life*, and Helen’s declaration of Bing’s growing distance from Lola’s intellectual level is in this sense quite dramatic: Bing is growing, rising, ascending – Lola is not. As the previously mentioned scene from *Living Out*, this comparison, too, conjures the image from Stahl’s movie adaptation of Hurst’s novel (fig. 6). Bea, the white employer, prospers and rises, much like Bing, whose development in intellect is perceived by Helen as already having exceeded that of Lola. Lola is no longer needed, and is forced down the social ladder and out of the work environment. In Helen’s mind, Lola is a domestic worker only, and she stages her into an intellectually inferior position which corresponds to that of the mammy stereotype, who was typically portrayed as a “silly” and happily inferior slave (M.M. Manring *Slave* 19).

Unfortunately, Helen’s staging of Lola as infantile is strengthened by William’s school teachers, and we see movements on the social ladder by a further decline of the nanny’s position. William’s teachers recommend that Claire and Richard fire her because they “don’t think she can really control him” (Simpson 256). They of course prioritize William’s development, but their statement nonetheless draws certain boundaries around the nanny on the basis of her non-American ethnicity: “We see this with a lot of the foreign housekeepers” (256). When Claire shares her observations on the other nannies’ own children as well-behaved, the teachers again offer their “professional” opinion: “What works in their culture may not work in ours” (256). The way Lola’s performance of her duties is deemed inadequate based on what the teachers’ perceive as part of her background and ethnicity, illuminates the racist and consumerist view on domestic workers. This becomes the ending of the relationship between

Lola and Claire; Lola is pushed down the social ladder, and a strengthening of the portrayal of the nanny as the servant class is visible in the treatment of her as a commodity.

Thus we see a revitalization of the social and racial hierarchy from the days of Hurst's *Imitation of Life*. Helen makes audible Mrs Berend's whisper from the past: her view of Lola as no more than a nanny corresponds with Mrs Berend's view of Marjorie as no more than a servant. The whisper becomes an authoritarian representation by Helen's enforcement, and works for the erasure of the nanny's own characteristics by an overlaying of traces of the mammy figure. However, "the palimpsest's structure of interlocking, competing narratives has the advantage of preventing the dominant voice from completely silencing the others" (Alarcón 35-6, qtd. in Dillon "Reinscribing" 255). In other words, the fabric at hand must be regarded as precisely that: a fabric of interwoven texts which can be used as an "interpretation of culture and of history crucial to that discourse's social and political, as well as literary critical, enterprise" (Dillon "Reinscribing" 254). As I shall return to later, the aesthetic representations of the doméstica replicates very real cultural and social structures. We shall now explore further the literary representation in the novels, where we see that a "profile," an "ideal," for the perfect nanny starts taking shape. So far, Mrs Berend and Helen have defined this "profile" as a nanny with no characteristics beyond her occupation, and who subsequently belongs to the servant class. The trace of mammy in the representation of, and expectation to, the doméstica is consequently visible, and helps us make sense of the relation between two figures, and two periods.

Mrs Berend's attitudes are enforced by another of the novel's housewives, namely Beth Martin. This character is the clearest example of the text's revitalization of the "mammyscript." She takes to an extreme level what Mrs Berend defines as her right as a domestic employer, namely the demand for the doméstica's constant presence. When interviewing her nanny Esperanza, Beth asks if she plans to have children of her own. Esperanza answers that she is

unable to have children because she is barren, and Beth's immediate reaction is "I'm thinking, Great, she'll bond with Brookie and Kate. Not like the last one, who left in the middle of the night" (Simpson 229). As we remember from Chapter 1, the mammy stereotype came with a "natural" predilection for her white charges over her biological ones (Wallace-Sanders 19). Beth seems to assume that since Esperanza cannot have her own children, she "must" naturally have a liking for Beth's children. This mammy-like quality is subsequently approved. In other words, Esperanza fits the "profile." Hurst's *Imitation of Life* also comes to mind here, with Delilah's difficulties in having to prioritize Jessie over her own daughter. As we remember, this has tragic consequences for Peola, who ends up passing as white. When Beth expresses delight over her doméstica's inability to have children, she may – disturbingly – have a point. Esperanza will not need to choose between her own biological children and her white charges, and hence, she will not suffer.

Interestingly, the dilemma that Delilah suffered, and Esperanza avoids, *is* in fact echoed in *My Hollywood*, but through Ruth, one of the other domésticas. Ruth brings her white charge, Ginger Saperstein, to William's birthday party. Her own granddaughter, Aileen, is also there, with Cheska, her babysitter. When Ginger "pushes Aileen off the lap of Ruth and Aileen turns on the grass making a noise" (Simpson 263), Ruth is caught on the borderline between fantasy and reality. Lola, who narrates the course of events, states that Aileen "cannot stand to see her grandmother bossed" (263). Aileen, who is born American, is unable to separate between the roles that her grandmother juggles in this situation. She sees Ruth as her own grandmother, and fails to understand the rules and norms that her role as nanny places her under. Ruth is forced to succumb to what is expected from her by her position, which means having "to answer the wishes of her employer" (263). This way of yielding to white expectation, and deprioritizing one's own flesh and blood, is in itself a repetition of Delilah's misery as a mammy figure, and an unwilling and painful performance that the job entails.

In *Living Out*, this performance takes shape in an even clearer way of staging. It is more concerned with the expectation to prioritize the white children, and enlightens us further on what is accepted within the frames of the “profile” of the underlying “mammyscript.” All of the domésticas in Loomer’s play have children of their own, but when Ana in a job-interview tells Wallace and Linda that she has a son with her in Los Angeles, they are no longer interested. They need, in the words of Linda, “someone who can make my kids a priority” (*Living Out* Act 1 Scene 1). Ana thus does not fit the profile of the nanny they are looking for, and realizes that in order to acquire a job she must lie. When she is interviewed by Nancy, she steps into the role of a doméstica with children in her home country. She fits the “profile” and is accepted.

When Ana enters this role she also enters the stage of the site, and becomes entrapped by expectations to her role. One example of this is when Wallace, the most narrow-minded of the housewives, suspects that when Ana takes a day off from work, she is lying, and intends to instead leave the job. Linda offers the following explanation:

See, they don’t consider it “lying” – they just don’t want you to be unhappy! It’s just easier to say, “My mother is sick in Guatemala” than “I just got a job for a dollar more an hour.” The thing is they’re just such sweet people. Especially the Mexicans (*Living Out* Act 1 Scene 10)

This piece of information hardly offers any insight, neither on the feared scenario of Ana quitting her job, nor Ana’s “ways” in general. Indeed, since Ana is neither Guatemalan nor Mexican, but Salvadoran, Linda’s reductionist view on ethnicity is worth noting. Where Helen in *My Hollywood* generalized Filipinas into one “nation of nannies,” Linda includes other ethnicities and nations into this “servant class.” For her, the Salvadoran Ana is no different from Guatemalans or the “sweet people” of Mexico. They are all Latinas, all nannies.

Linda’s representation also depicts the citizens of this particular “world of nannies” as somewhat simple-minded and ignorant. Her suggestion that they are too “sweet” to lie seems

at first sight an excuse or a justification; however, in the conversation that follows between the employers, we see a strengthening of the staging:

LINDA. The thing is, they just may not understand the position they put us in.

NANCY. Well, they have children –

WALLACE. And they're able to leave them in another country – I mean, could you do that? (*Living Out* Act 1 Scene 10)

Linda's comment suggests that the nannies do not have the basic abilities to understand the consequences of their actions. Nancy's response, however, surprisingly acknowledges the doméstica's role as a mother instead of just a nanny. Not only does she oppose Linda's staging of the domésticas into an inferior position; she also lifts her from it and into a position which is more equal to her own. Consequently, Linda's staging of Ana into an inferior being is disrupted. However, order is soon restored when Wallace interrupts Nancy. Wallace intersects the potential representation of the doméstica as a fellow mother instead of a nanny and a nanny only by portraying her maternal sides as cold and irresponsible. By turning the focus this way, as well as asking if the others would be able to treat their own children in that manner, Wallace creates a juxtaposition between employer and employee based on maternal qualities, and the doméstica's subordination is restored.

Interestingly, Wallace's restoration of order in this representation adds another feature to the "profile." When Ana enters the role as doméstica and "make[s] [her employers'] kids a priority," she acts according to the fantasy. She agrees to the conditions of a prioritizing of the white child over her own, and traces of the fantasy are again visible: expectations to Ana enforce a constant repetition of Delilah's prioritizing of Jessie over Peola. For Delilah, this lead to an involuntary neglect of her own daughter, who was not taught to love herself. Still, Delilah followed the "mammyscript," and neglected her own child as a consequence of her "deep love" for her white charge. Disturbingly, Wallace attempts to stage the domésticas into this part of

the role as well when she depicts them as irresponsible mothers. Compared to Ruth's involuntary mistreatment of her granddaughter as consequence of the expectation of making Ginger her priority, the *domésticas* in *Living Out* are staged into a visualized and perhaps more deliberate or conscious neglect of their own children. This brings the contemporary staging of the *doméstica* into the scape of the fantasy, and closer to the white representation of the mammy figure.

In *América's Dream*, we find the notion of the "servant class" in the *domésticas'* backgrounds. This novel's "world of nannies" includes *domésticas* with various backgrounds:

Liana, from El Salvador, was a bank teller. Frida, from Paraguay, was a schoolteacher. Mercedes, from the Dominican Republic, was a telephone operator. They see one another at the playground, or when they drop off and pick up their charges at one another's homes. They all have one thing in common. They've entered the United States illegally (Santiago 219)

These characters' former professions contrast with what happens when they leave their home countries. When crossing the border their previous occupations are no longer valid, and they end up "on the playground," reduced to one single group. Choosing a job is no longer an option: "We don't have a choice when we come here," Adela persists. "We have to take whatever work we can find" (220). For all of them this work is that of a nanny, and they go from skilled professions to being a *doméstica*. Together they form a broadening of the "nation of nannies" in Simpson and Loomer's works, into a "world of nannies."

Unlike these characters, América works as a maid before immigrating to the U.S. Her mother Ester is also a maid, as well as the four generations before her. Surprisingly and disturbingly, we hear vague echoes of a tradition shared by the mammy figure and the *doméstica* both, namely slavery. "La Casa Del Francés," the hotel where América works in Vieques is an old, restored sugar plantation, originally owned by a "Frenchman whose name is lost to

memory,” and built by “dark natives whose work made his fortune possible” (Santiago 76). The Frenchman had an illegitimate child with his late wife’s maid, Marguerite, and her descendants, América one of them, have all “been mopping [La Casa Del Frances’s] floors, making its beds, washings its walls” (76). Here we encounter several traces of repetition. The Frenchman’s unacknowledged relationship with Marguerite crosses class divides, and echoes a dark side of African American slave history. Peola, Delilah’s daughter, is also a product of this history, and of a relation that should not be – that which crossed the racial line. And interestingly, another such relation is that of similarities between the generations of maids which came of the Frenchman’s position as a slave owner, and the mammy figure which originated on the scene of the American slave owner’s plantation. In other words, América’s bloodline has elements that are similar to that of the mammy figure.

América is content with her job as a maid, and she finds the work rewarding. But when she starts her job with the Leveretts in New York, she finds that it is very different from her job as a maid at La Casa Del Frances. Karen Leverett, her employer, gives her two days off from work each week, but like the employers in *My Hollywood* and *Living Out*, she nonetheless expects her doméstica’s constant presence and availability. In one scene Karen enters América’s room and asks her for the second time to change her work schedule. América reluctantly agrees; however, after Karen has left, “América doesn’t remember when she got up to follow [her], but she’s holding on to the doorknob with great force” (Santiago 202). Her reaction suggests a feeling of “intrusion” on her own territory, in her own private sphere. Karen also gives América a list of important phone numbers for her to place by the phone in her room. This further enlightens the notion of “intrusion”; not only is an expectation of constant availability placed upon América, her employer also adds another feature to the “profile,” namely her *own* constant presence in América’s life.

Karen's intrusion can be read as a *domestication* of América, and we here see an example of the palimpsest representing "history as colonialism, the past as a series of oppressions and displacements, the struggle and vying for territory and existence" (Dillon "Reinscribing" 254). By her imposition, Karen pushes the borderline between employer and employee back in on the employee's territory, and as a result, Karen increases América's presence in their house – not as América, but as *doméstica*. This is interesting in relation to how América experienced the American tourists' "intrusion" in Vieques. She felt that they regarded her "as a different species of creature from themselves, (...) like part of the tropical landscape they came to experience, something to be stared at with curiosity and forgotten the moment they returned home" (Santiago 227-28). When América enters the U.S., however, her exoticism, her "otherness," is not welcome; it is an intrusion of the "profile," and must be erased. The nanny is not to display such deviations from the fantasy and the "mammyscript," and as Karen intrudes on América's "territory" she attempts to erase América's own representation and persona by pushing upon her a representation of the *doméstica* as a fantasy.

This notion of "otherness" is ultimately what causes América to lose her job. Karen Leverett visits América at the hospital after the encounter with Correa, América's former boyfriend and father of their daughter, and announces that "[u]nder the circumstances" she has "hired someone else" (Santiago 323). Of course, it is understandable that the Leveretts wish to end the employment after such an incident; however, what is of interest here is América's deviation from the "profile" of the "mammyscript." When Correa breaks into the Leverett house, an element of América's background, her "otherness," literally intrudes on the territory of the role of the *doméstica*, and on the site of the fantasy. América becomes then not solely a nanny, but rather a woman with a life and a background of her own. The idyll of the fantasy is broken, and América is replaced. This unwanted presence of the *doméstica*'s "otherness" brings us to the next trope, namely desexualisation.

3.2.3. Desexualisation

As we remember from Chapter 1, the creators of the original literary mammy character depicted her as mannish in order to remove any sexual threat from her characteristic. Fannie Hurst's character of Delilah was a very clear example of this feature of the "mammyscript"; her body was compared to different buildings such as a boat house and a tent, and the portrayal bordered to ludicrousness. As a trope in the palimpsest of the mammy, however, the notion of desexualisation is entangled with contemporary representations.

As previously discussed, Loomer's character of Ana entered the site of the fantasy and performance when she lied about her children. Regarding her appearance, however, she makes no alteration, and we see early on that this is perceived as a problem for Nancy: "Maybe if you have time this weekend you could get something more – comfortable to wear to work? (*Looks at her tight jeans.*) Just something ... more comfortable" (*Living Out*, Act 1 Scene 4). Nancy clearly disapproves of Ana's clothing in the work environment; the way she dresses seems to enhance her body. The way Nancy sees her nanny points to her perception of Ana as, or a fear that she might be, the stereotypically seductive Latina maid. She subsequently does not fit the "profile" of the nanny that Nancy is after, which clearly is one with a more neutral body and who poses no sexual threat.

This reading is strengthened in the later scene where Nancy returns from a business trip to New York, and finds a glass with stains of lipstick on it in her living room. When Richard tells Nancy that it is Ana's, Nancy immediately asks "[d]id you sleep with her?" (*Living Out* Act 2, Scene 3). Richard's reaction is interesting: "I think if you really examine what you just said ... I think you will have to admit that it is a pretty god-damn racist assumption. *And classist – and sexist too*" (Act 2, Scene 3, italics in original). Just what is racist, classist and sexist about Nancy's assumption, is unclear. The only logical explanation of Richard's mind set here is that he reads Nancy's accusation as based in a fear of Ana being a sensual, Latina temptress. The

fact that Richard jumps to this conclusion indicates that he, too, sees his nanny according to this particular fantasy – a notion which becomes strengthened as they continue their argument. Ana is in the same room, and feels very awkward as the couple does not take notice of her. In the middle of their arguing back and forth, they give her various instructions, such as picking up coffee beans at a particular store and handing her diapers. They speak to her as a nanny, with instructions, and speak *about* her as a fantasy, a representation, and a stereotype. However, as their quarrel displays, the fantasy that they see Ana as, namely the Latina stereotype, is not the fantasy they would like her to be: a mammy figure.

This scene sheds a clearer light on Nancy encouraging Ana to buy new clothes. Her view of Ana's body as a stereotypical Latina threat to her marriage is seemingly the only side of Ana that Nancy perceives as negative because it does not fit the "profile." Nancy's fear thus functions as a motivation and an argument for the desexualisation – the "mammyfication" – of Ana. The mammy was never portrayed with flattering features, and any potential scenario of a sexual threat was prohibited by her representation. Nancy calls upon the fantasy of this portrayal, this "mammyscript," to do its work. She herself initiates the process of "the preservation of the status quo" in order to diverge what she perceives as a sexual threat. This attempt of desexualisation functions literally as an overlaying: Ana's figure can be erased by the help of more "comfortable" clothes. Thus, the two figures of the *doméstica* and the mammy become entangled: Nancy's view of the threatening Latina stereotype is used as an argument for the need of the mammy figure, and the two roles come to construct each other.

In *My Hollywood*, the fear of seduction is not an issue at all. When Claire and Paul interview for a nanny, Claire's observations are as follows: "Three toothless, more than half heavily made up, a few truly ragged, they resembled the hags of Grimm more than Juliet's nurse or any Disney nanny" (Simpson 5). Claire's lack of experience with nannies renders her unknowing of any reality of the practice, and she has a preconceived vision of the domestic

worker with a Caucasian appearance. “Juliet’s nurse” refers to the character in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, and interestingly, Kimberly Wallace-Sanders lists her as an example of familiar literary characters of “feminine servility” (16). But although such a character belonged to the same social class as that of the mammy figure, the mammy’s skin colour placed her in a lower position on the social ladder than the white character of Juliet’s nurse. For “[b]y layering racial inferiority on top of class inferiority,” Wallace-Sanders says, “the mammy moves into another sphere of time-honored loyalty altogether” (16). And such is also Claire’s shock when she meets “reality,” which is that all thirteen women they interview are immigrants, and to her scary and “troll-like.” Ironically, the stark contrast between Claire’s Disney-like image and the reality she faces only moves the domestic worker from one fantasy to another, namely the animalistic appearance of the first image of Aunt Jemima by Chris Rutt (cf. fig 3, p. 24 in this thesis). Claire’s account of the domésticas she interviews form a repetition of Rutt’s mammy figure, and what is represented in the novel is a doméstica with features that echo her.

Claire’s portrayal is in itself a suggestion that the mammy figure sets her imprints on the contemporary representation of the doméstica’s appearance. Despite the fact that Claire’s remarks are thoughtless observations, they are a case in point of the type of derogatory representation that the novels’ employers create of the doméstica. This contemporary, literary representation of the domestic worker contains traces of the mammy figure. It is a palimpsestuous construction of a relation – something assumed gone, erased, but which proves involuted in the literary figure, and thus still present.

One scene in particular takes this depiction further, and here we perceive another echo of the mammy figure’s history: diacritical advertising. When Lola is fired by Claire, she is forced to go through an agency to get a new job. The agency advertises the nannies in a leaflet, and for Lola the text is as follows: “*Introducing ... Lola, a fifty-six-year-old, one-hundred-pound Filipina with a green card who drives and speaks English. She has a big smile (all her*

own teeth) and a big heart” (Simpson 290, italics in original). The focus on her body emphasizes what does not pose a threat. Her height and weight give little information about her appearance, but most importantly, no hints of sensuality are traceable. Lola is thus advertised as the “ideal” nanny in terms of appearance.

Further, the text emphasizes Lola’s charisma through her smile and emphatic qualities, but the additional information about her teeth seems somewhat misplaced or peculiar. However, the reference to a big smile with her own teeth in fact evokes the image of Fannie Hurst’s character of Delilah, whom Bea envisioned as an Aunt Jemima-like figure with her “great fluted white smile” (Hurst *Imitation* 86). Again, Robert L. Craig thoughts on diacritical advertising are relevant. In Simpson’s novel, we see “[e]thnic diacritica” in the advertisement of Lola, but in a slightly different way than what we have seen before (“Picturing” 28). Lola’s traits are not typical and direct markers of her ethnicity, but signal and advertise her position as doméstica. What is emphasized in the advertisement’s portrayal of Lola is features which constitute a mix of her own traits, and connotations to the mammy stereotype. The site of ideas and representation is thus the host of a contemporary representation that portrays a reflection of the mammy figure. Hence, it takes part in the entangled fabric of the palimpsestuousness of the fantasy.

Thus far in this palimpsestuous reading of the works that constitute traces of the mammy figure we have seen that the texts present us with the contemporary domestic worker’s distinctiveness. However, we also see that through the employers’ wishes, expectations, requirements or even demands, the two figures of the doméstica and the mammy stereotype are brought together on the site of ideas and into a relationality that connects them. This connection – a relation between the two figures that should not be – is the palimpsestuousness of the texts. The “profile” that the employers create for the ideal nanny, then, is an echo of the “mammyscript” in itself. Interestingly, it also contains another echo of the mammy figure,

namely that of performativity. In the following we shall take a closer look at this repetition of performance by exploring how the *domésticas* respond to the “profile” that is laid out for them to step into.

3.3. Performing the “Mammyscript”

In the final part of this chapter, I would like to focus the discussion around traces of the final trope that constitutes the mammy figure, namely her enactment of assumed “natural” maternal qualities. According to Kimberly Wallace-Sanders, 19th century theories on race were a source for the common belief that “African American women were thought to be innately superior in their abilities as caretakers for white children” (8). Wallace-Sanders refers to Francis Pendleton Gaines’s 1924 retrospective study of life on the Southern plantation, where he concluded that “[t]here can be no doubt that with the *peculiar African capacity for devotion*, the old mammy dearly loved her charges” (193, qtd. in Wallace-Sanders 8). In her interviews with segregation era domestic workers and employers, Susan Tucker supports this notion: a common belief of the African American woman was that she was “the more instinctive mother” (43). As we have seen, a summary of these notions is evident in the portrayal of the literary mammy figure, who had a “natural” preference for her white charges based on her ethnicity’s “organic” or instinctual quality to take care of children.

What is interesting about this trope in relation to contemporary literature on the *doméstica* is that it exists on the border between performance and non-performance. In my examination of the tropes of being “part of the family,” the servant class, and desexualisation, it is clear that the *domésticas* perform. The features are in various ways assigned to the *domésticas*, and function as overlayings of the *domésticas*’ own persona. Having an ability to take care of children can of course be acquired through experience, but having an organic and natural instinct because of one’s ethnicity or skin colour is quite different: it belongs to the fantasy of the original mammy figure. As we saw in Chapter 2, Hurst’s character of Delilah

constantly prioritized the white Jessie over her own daughter, Peola, and thus retained credibility in her performance of this feature before her white employer and charge. However, so strong was her performance of this “instinctual preference,” that it prevented her from presenting herself as mother to her daughter. The consequence of her success as an actress was failure as mother. Since “the palimpsest’s structure of interlocking, competing narratives has the advantage of preventing the dominant voice from completely silencing the others,” we must also listen to the voice of the “weak” in the works (Alarcón 35-6, qtd. in Dillon “Reinscribing” 255). We shall therefore explore from the doméstica’s point of view the trope of having a “natural” ability to take care of children, and find how they approach this part of the role on the site of performance.

In *Living Out*, Ana is forced to display a natural propriety for taking care of white children relatively early. During her interviews, she is asked questions concerning her view on different aspects of bringing up children. When Wallace asks her how she feels about disciplining children, it is clear that she is being “tested.” She is asked a number of questions, where Wallace maps and evaluates her perspective on child upbringing. When Wallace asks her very open questions, Ana knows “*there’s a right and wrong answer,*” and is unsure of what to respond (*Living Out* Act 1, Scene 1). Either, she can follow her own instincts, and answer according to how she would treat her own children, or she can answer the opposite. One such example is:

WALLACE: Do you believe in spanking, Ana? (*Again, Ana has no idea what Wallace wants her to say. Finally, she just tells the truth.*)

ANA. No. I don’t. I don’t spank.

WALLACE. (*After a beat; thrilled.*) Excellent!

Ana luckily gives the “right” answer based on elements of her own background. The text here brings forth the fact that Ana’s answer is based in her own views; it is “*the truth.*” When Wallace

decides that Ana based on this fits the “profile,” and “approves” her into the role of the *doméstica*, it thus portrays Ana as a nanny with a mammy-like quality of an instinctive ability to take care of children. However, the conversation also tells us that the two women share the same perspective on children – they are not particularly different from each other. Nonetheless, because Ana is a Latina immigrant, and works as a nanny, she is placed in the position where Wallace is able to evaluate her, “test” her, and see if she is “good” enough to take care of her children. The two women are everything but equal by this view.

However, as we know, Ana does not earn a position with Wallace after all, because she fails to match the profile when it comes to the requirement of not having children. She learns that she must lie, and tells Nancy that both her sons are in El Salvador. By doing this, she steps into the role of the fantasy and acquires what it takes to meet this demand, this “mammy” feature. But, as we saw in the case of Delilah, the mammy role has repercussions. At the end of the play, Ana is forced to prioritize Jenna, her white charge, over picking up her son, Santiago, at soccer practice. Santiago is instead picked up by Ana’s sister-in-law, who has recently earned her license. In a preceding discussion with Bobby, a foreshadowing of the tragedy of the car accident is given as Ana strongly opposes this, saying that her sister-in-law is too young, and indicating that her car is not safe. When Santiago dies in the car accident, it is thus vaguely suggested by the foreshadowing that the tragedy could have been prevented if Ana had been there for him instead. Thus, tragically, Ana fits the “profile” and the “mammyscript” that Wallace has previously staged the *doméstica* into when depicting them as unfit mothers for their own children. Because of Ana’s priority of her white charge over her biological one, her own child ends up suffering.

When Richard and Nancy return to their empty apartment, they fear that Ana has kidnapped Jenna. This is not part of the “mammyscript”; Ana has stepped out of her role as the “faithful servant.” The rumours that are heard about the incident, both amongst Linda and

Wallace, the employers, and Zoila and Sandra, the domésticas, are interesting. Again, the author makes use of the scenography to illuminate the two “sides,” which are on the same stage, in the same city and in the same community, but divided by class and ethnicity. They recount the sequence of events as follows:

WALLACE. She was taking care of the baby the other night – and something happened – so she was taking the baby with her to the hospital and –

LINDA. The hospital – ?

ZOILA. Pues, Mrs. Breyer said Mrs. Robin said that Ana said something happen to her son – but that’s a lie ’cause her kids are in El Salvador, verdad?

SANDRA. (*Beat; lies.*) Pues, sí ... Pero –

LINDA and SANDRA. Why was she at the hospital?

ZOILA. Quién sabe? Maybe she wasn’t at no hospital! That Ana ... tan misteriosa! Like she think she better or something.

WALLACE. And, as it turns out, she *was* illegal after all. Apparently she was a rather mysterious person... (*Living Out Act 2, Scene 7*)

The way that Ana’s “lie” is twisted into a reality is remarkable. Ana was forced to tell the “lie” in order to acquire the job – a fact that Sandra is informed about. Despite her hesitation in the above quotation, she refrains from telling Zoila this, although it could have made a difference. The conversation represents Ana as dishonest about the reason for going to the hospital, and indicates that Ana did kidnap Jenna. Ana did not lie about her status as an illegal immigrant; she informed Nancy, who gave her legal assistance. Nancy was in fact the one who lied about this to her friends, not Ana. Both groups tweak elements of Ana’s act into reality, and her reality into an act, and portray Ana as a mix of reality and fantasy, twisted into a representation that does not fit the “profile.”

At the end of the play, the misunderstanding regarding Ana taking Jenna with her to the hospital is settled, but she is nonetheless fired by Richard and Nancy. The fact that she brings Jenna with her to the hospital proves her assumed “natural” ability to take care of children “unnatural” and wrong. This deviation from the “mammyscript” is strengthened in a conversation between Richard and Nancy, illustrating that the representation brought forth of Ana as dishonest and a liar, still stands. Nancy and Richard believe the rumours that go around about Ana: “Wallace’s nanny knew her from the park and apparently there were things I didn’t ... (*She gets a cigarette.*) I mean, can you ever really know someone – who’s so – different from you?” (*Living Out* Act 2, Scene 8). The word “different” is interesting. Ana deviates from the “mammyscript” by prioritizing her own son, and is therefore “different,” an “Other,” both compared to her employers and her fellow nannies. In the conversation quoted in the above paragraph, we see that Wallace stages Ana not as the fantasy of the doméstica, but as an “Other.” This “otherness” is not welcome on the site of ideas, and Nancy and Richard thus decide that they will no longer need Ana’s services.

In Simpson’s *My Hollywood*, Lola’s response to her employers’ demands further enlighten the difference between the doméstica’s job as a nanny and her position as a servant. We have seen that Lola is considered “part of the family,” portrayed with a “neutral” appearance, and is considered a “great” Filipina. Lola’s silent objection to the latter element informed us that unlike the mammy stereotype, who had an “implicit understanding and acceptance of her inferiority” (Wallace-Sanders 2), she does not embrace Helen’s attempt to stage her into an inferior servant position. The reason that Lola endures the inferior portrayal painted by her employer is that she takes pride in working for her children’s tuition. Her motivation for working as a nanny is revealed early on in the novel: “Me, I work for money” (Simpson 21). In this statement also lies a very important fact about her job: it is an act, and not

her identity. Lola claims a “declaration of independence” from her work, in the sense that she regards herself as more than “just” a nanny: she is her family’s breadwinner.

This notion is strengthened by another well-known element of the role as domestic worker: acting. From Lola’s point of view, the job as nanny entails performance. This aspect is suggested already in the novel’s title, which firmly places the focus on the greatest acting business in the world. Lola is quite clear on the aim for her stay in Los Angeles by her first words: “Lana Turner they discovered at the Schraft counter, me on a bench for the Wilshire bus” (Simpson 14). Lola here suggests that she, like the very famous Hollywood star²¹, is an actress. The U.S. is her scene, and the career as a nanny her American Dream. It is also evident that Lola is good at being a nanny. She is offered a job by the Grant family based on their preference for her over Vicky, who works for them at the time: “They tell me stories about Vicky. It is true, Vicky is not a good babysitter. I would never hire her for my kids. Maybe at this one thing, I am best” (Simpson 75).

And as it happens, Lola does have a talent for taking care of children. This is especially clear in the scene where she accompanies Claire and William to New York, so that Claire can attend a concert where one of her musical compositions is being performed. The inside of the concert hall – the scene itself, the performers, Claire as the attentive composer on the first row, the audience – is indeed a scenery made for performance. However, when examining Lola’s self-declared acting in relation to this scenery, this stage, if you will, it is clear that nothing about her movements and actions are acts. Carefully and affectionately, she tends for William, talking to him in a soothing voice. She sees his needs and purchases formula milk with her own money without Claire’s knowing, prioritizing William’s hunger before his mother’s need to do everything right and feed him breast milk only. In essence, Lola does display a maternal side;

²¹ The reference to Lana Turner is in itself interesting in relation to the mammy figure. Turner starred in Douglas Sirk’s 1959 film adaptation of Fannie Hurst’s *Imitation of Life*, where Turner played the role of Lora Meredith, the film’s version of Bea Pullman. Her business success was in the film not on waffles, but on acting. In this perhaps coincidental reference, we again see residues of the mammy figure.

her genuineness, and not an act. She actually fulfils the requirement of a “natural” ability to take care of children.

However, it is important to note that this “natural” ability to take care of children is in fact not according to the “mammyscript,” because it does not derive from her ethnicity. For when Ruth, the “mentor” in Lola’s nanny community states that she “believed [Lola] had a talent for babysitting because of the schools [her] children attend” (103), she confirms Lola’s skills and competence within the profession, but also highlights the fact that Lola’s abilities to take care of children is because she has children of her own. Lola is a good mother for her own children, and brings her experiences from this role into that of being a nanny. However, when examining the first meeting between Claire and Lola, it is clear that Claire does not perceive the situation this way. The reason that Claire hires Lola as her nanny is interesting: “I found Lola sitting on a bench and hired her, without references. I liked the way she looked. She was small, dark, well-joined” (Simpson 11). It is evident that Claire hires Lola on the ground of something as simple as her appearance – more precisely her “dark” skin colour. So sure is Claire that Lola is a great babysitter based on her looks that she does not care to ask for reassurance. This evokes the view on African Americans as “natural” caretakers as a result of their skin colour and belonging to the servant class. Claire thus inscribes Lola into the “natural” role as a nanny, and stages her into the site of the fantasy and the “mammyscript,” on the basis of her ethnicity.

However, as discussed, Lola ends up losing her job with Claire because William’s schoolteachers see her way of handling her white charge as below par, and as part of her background: “What works in their culture may not work in ours” (Simpson 256). This, in turn, means that what Claire perceived as Lola’s “natural” ability to take care of children based on her skin colour, is “revealed” as what it really is: part of Lola’s own background and experience with her own children. This is very different from the “mammyscript,” and since it deviates, it

is relabelled as part of Lola's "otherness." Subsequently, Lola's presence at the site of the fantasy is no longer wanted.

Interestingly, another of the fantasy's features is incompatible with that of the *doméstica*, namely the briefly mentioned acceptance of inferiority that the position as *doméstica* entails. This is especially evident when Lola works with the Gelfond family. The Gelfonds lay out her job description in a contract (Simpson 294-9), which describes her job as a nanny very thoroughly. The contract illuminates the hierarchy between domestic employer and employee. One very telling example is the requirement that follows: "When Wanda's services are not necessary and she is given 1 or 2 days' advance notice, the Gelfonds may ask for equal hours of service at another time" (297). This point clearly illustrates who is in charge. The nanny will be treated as if she has no life of her own, and her constant availability will be demanded. "[T]ravel opportunities, flight miles, etc." are listed as "[o]ther benefits" (298) of the job; however, it is clear that these "benefits" are required of her as part of the job, and not any kind of privilege that she receives as a bonus. The contract also states that the Gelfonds will be able to end Lola's employment "without cause upon two weeks' notice," whereas Lola is required to give "six weeks' notice" (298-9) – a very significant difference. When reading this contract, an expectation of subordination is very thoroughly illustrated. After listing these, and several other points that describe the job as a disharmonised relationship between employer and employee, the contract concludes: "We look forward to you being a part of our family for many years to come" (299). The Gelfonds expect Lola to accept the inequality and inferiority described in her contract, which is what the expression of "being part of our family" so ironically means. Lola works for the Gelfonds for one week; as she states herself: "I sign the contract, but I do not join the Gelfond family" (Simpson 299). She refuses to accept the inferiority with which the nanny is labelled.

What is interesting about the contract, however, is that its outline of the job's inferiority is not very different from the inferiority that Helen staged Lola into, and which Lola at that point endured. Lola's resignation with the Gelfonds thus points toward a development – an increasingly clear and explicit resistance toward the fantasy's feature of inferiority. When she is fired by Judith, her reaction tells us why she resists the inferiority that the job entails: "I just now realize that I love this" (Simpson 396). This is an interesting development from the start of the novel, where she saw herself as an actress who worked for money only. The development points to a change in Lola's view of her job. She no longer sees herself as a performer of the job. Rather, she is a nanny, and takes great pride in her profession – not because she loves acting, but because she loves her job as a nanny. But the pride she takes in her job is not compatible with the disgrace that such a degree of inferiority and subservience pushes upon her by the very detailed contract. This is also the reason that Lola is fired by Judith. The announcement of the discontinuation of Lola's position comes as the result of an argument between Lola on the one hand, and Judith and her newly acquired boyfriend on the other. The dispute is rather comical and concerns housework, and ironing in particular. For Lola, ironing places her in a different position than a nanny, namely that of a servant for a family. When the boyfriend slips a poem called "Ode to Ironing" under Lola's door, she does not see the humour in it, and feels ridiculed. The position as a servant is not something she can take pride in: firstly, because it does not involve taking care of children as a primary concern, and a job that she finds joy in, and secondly because it is a much more inferior position than being a nanny. Thus, not surprisingly, the only feature of the fantasy that Lola starts to actively work against, is what causes her to lose her job.

Interestingly, the novel here touches upon and illuminates the contemporary situation of domestic workers in the U.S. and their fight for a legislation that secures basic work rights. The Gelfond contract in fact paints a very representative reflection of reality in this sense, and sheds

light on the fact that the domestic worker is subject to severe exploitation by their employers. The relationship is highly imbalanced, and subsequently quite similar to the domestic's working conditions of the mid-1900s²².

But despite the novel's important illumination of such realistic social and political issues, the representation of its domestic workers ends with a disturbingly similar portrayal as other well-known works on the mammy figure. As we saw, when Lola returns to the Philippines, she realizes she is no longer needed. Her own children are all grown up, and her husband has had a girlfriend while she has been away. Her life in the Philippines is not what she wants for herself anymore, and she misses her job. What Lola has learned then, is that she cannot succeed in both territories. Either, she can succeed as a domestic worker in the U.S., which means stepping fully onto the site of the fantasy and embracing the inferiority that comes with the job. This, however, may mean disregarding her dignity and self-worth. The second option, then, is to accept her own redundancy in the Philippines – a choice which may also include a disregard for her self-worth. When Claire comes to see her, the dilemma is resolved. She brings with her an offer from Judith of having her old position back. Judith is no longer in a relationship with her boyfriend, and is in need of help. This offer is presented as a resolution, a relief, and is an interesting parallel to the previously mentioned novel by Katherine Stockett, called *The Help*. This novel was published in 2009, only one year before Simpson's, and is a retrospective, but extremely glossy portrayal of the lives of African American domestic workers, or mammies, in the South during the Jim Crow era. Like Lola, Minny, one of Stockett's mammy characters, is also offered a job with her employers which secures her future as a domestic: "You'll always have a job here with us, Minny. For the rest of your life, if you want" (Stockett 405). The offer is presented to Minny as generous, and she happily accepts, seeing it as a resolution to her problems. Similarly, Lola decides to accept her job offer, and

²² I will return to this aspect in the concluding chapter to this thesis.

subsequently accepts her presence, role, or even belonging, at the site of the fantasy, that she so desperately has attempted to resist.

Although Judith's boyfriend is out of the picture, and the threat of ironing – of the inferior position as a servant – is gone, Lola nonetheless returns to the same position she was fired from. This is evident in the first meeting between her and Judith after Lola's return. Judith takes a glance at Lola's coffee and the straw she drinks it with in order to keep her teeth clean, and Lola's narrative of Judith's first greetings is: "See," Judith says, "no one else will accept you, all the coffee you drink." Lola reflects: "It is not a joke, really. She is trying to be light for her pride" (417). Judith's insult functions as a reclaim of her superiority; Lola is not to believe that she has provided her with a favour by coming back. She is still the *doméstica*, the servant. Judith also portrays Lola as greedy by drinking too much of her employer's coffee, and subsequently she is depicted as unwanted. In other words, Judith communicates to Lola that she is lucky to have her job, and attempts to stage her into a position where she is dependent upon her employer. Judith's statement also points to Lola's teeth, suggesting that she has an unflattering feature which renders her undesired. This unladylike feature suggests desexualisation. In essence, Lola is again "part of the family." Lola, on her side, has returned to her silent objection, and continues to perform on the site of the fantasy. She is depicted as accepting of her position in the racial and social hierarchy. And so, the *doméstica* is reinscribed according to the "profile," an echo of the "mammyscript," and domestic harmony is restored.

3.4. Conclusion

In his essay on reading architecture as a palimpsest, Jason Phillips says that a "palimpsestuous reading involves making sense of a tangle of patterns in motion, (...) by looking for and considering invented and imposed social relations that are otherwise hidden – that remain beneath the surface of the cultural text." Phillips's focus on social relations is interesting in relation to the discussion in this chapter, for it describes very well what we find on the "site,"

or in the scape, of the fantasy. Where in Chapter 2 the “ghost” of the mammy figure rose to the surface and eclipsed the character of Delilah, refusing her to present herself as anything other than a mammy figure, contemporary literary representations of the domestic worker open up to new impulses on the same site. An untangling of the palimpsest, of the “involved and entangled, intricately interwoven” structure of texts that appear on this site, reveals an “involuted phenomenon” – a palimpsestuous relationship between the two figures of the mammy and the doméstica (Dillon “Reinscribing” 245).

More specifically, we find “social relations” between these two that should not be. By examining how the texts represent the employers’ framing of their domésticas, we see traces of the mammy figure. The employers’ expectations toward the domésticas’ performance of the job are actually demands for the fulfilment and revitalization of the fantasy of the “mammyscript.” The domésticas’ responses to such staging and framing illuminate another aspect of the mammy figure as seen in the preceding two chapters of this thesis, namely performance. We have seen how the mammy figure started out as a fictional character, was performed at minstrel shows and by Nancy Green in the embodiment of Aunt Jemima, and continued as an act in Fannie Hurst’s *Imitation of Life*. The works explored in this chapter continue this tradition by exposing the domestic workers’ contemporary situation as quite similar to what it was during the time of Hurst’s novel, in a racialized society that places upon the doméstica certain requirements that she must fulfil by acting according to a certain role. We may keep in mind that the fantasy is no longer the mammy figure only: in this chapter, we have read the structure of the material palimpsestuously, and we have subsequently seen the fantasy as a site, a host, for ideas, with new imprints and impulses from the layers occupying it. And we have found, then, that the “host” is still haunted by its “ghost,” and the mammy figure reclaims her presence in contemporary literature.

The texts thus produce more similarities between the two figures than one would perhaps expect, and revitalizes the mammy figure “precisely *as* the involution of texts” (Dillon “Reinscribing” 254). This is also where we find the palimpsestuousness of the fabric, the “complex (textual) relationality embodied in the palimpsest” (245). More precisely, we find that the two figures of the *doméstica* and the mammy construct each other. The representation of the mammy figure dominated the representation of “coloured” domestic workers for a long time, and described an “ideal” work relationship in the favour of the owner or employer. When the representation of the mammy figure stopped some time during the 1960s, a new proprietor of this role is found, as we have seen, in the *doméstica*. In other words, the *doméstica* had perhaps not come into her representation in literature had it not been for the mammy figure. Conversely, the *doméstica* is today needed for the revitalization of the mammy figure to be possible.

The revitalization of the mammy figure in contemporary literature sheds light on the complex ability of the fantasy to maintain its “status quo” (Abraham and Torok 125). As we have seen, not much has changed in the literary representation of the domestic worker since Hurst’s time. Although the site, or the “host,” has opened up for new impulses and ideas, the “underlying script” shines through, and make its imprint on our own times. One important function of the mammy figure was her “upholding” of racial hierarchy and white superiority in particular. She was always depicted as a faithful servant, but despite her loyalty, and because of her “race,” she was never allowed to leave her representation and ascend into a higher social position. In other words, she was always kept at a distance, on the outside, and firmly in “her place.” This notion is also reflected in the contemporary representation of domestic workers. All of the *domésticas* explored in this chapter have, in one way or another, hopes of success. By working as nannies, they aim to achieve different goals. Lola’s is to enable her children to educate themselves and acquire respectable jobs, and this she succeeds in. But for the other two

domésticas, the story is different, and sheds light on the current political and social situation of the domésticas. América's name points to the title of the novel, *América's Dream*, which undeniably evokes the notion of the American Dream. Her particular American Dream is to build a new and happier life in America. Her hope reminds us of Loomer's character of Ana, who escapes a war, and tries very hard to simply get by as an illegal immigrant in Los Angeles. However, what disables them to succeed is, ironically, their occupations as nannies. The fantasy's ability to maintain its "status quo" is what imprisons the domésticas into the servant class, and prevents them from rising, prospering and ascending in the American society. They are caught in the representation, and will continue in a state of, literally, *Living Out*, or outside, of society.

Conclusion

As mentioned in the introductory chapter of this thesis, in October of 2014 I attended a conference at the Barnard Center for Research on Women at Columbia University, which focused on domestic workers' conditions. The conference provided me with a rich insight into the sociological area of, and research on, domestic workers' conditions in the U.S. During the entire conference, I sat in awe listening to summaries of scholars' studies and research on domestic workers' situation in the U.S. and other parts of the world, discussions about various

themes within the field, as well as former and current domestic workers' accounts of their experiences with the job. I listened in awe because the conditions they described – the very visible inequalities between domestic worker and employer, clear exploitations, lack of rights and racism – may very easily have been told as stories about the mid-20th century conditions of the African American domestic worker. But more importantly, the stories displayed very clearly that some employers treated their domestics in such an inferior manner that epochs and realities of the mammy came to my mind.

All of the participants were, of course, somehow connected to domestic work: some of the scholars had themselves worked as domestics, and some were direct descendants of slaves or domestic workers from the segregated South or the integrated North. Others were simply interested in the field of research, but knew someone, either through acquaintances or their own research, who worked domestic. When the discussion moved into the theme of trafficking, several of the participants either shared their experiences about this, referred to those of their fellow domestics, or scholars having done research on the theme. One of the participants in the audience stated that, “slavery still exists. It just looks different.” Although these words do not describe the entire practice of domestic work, they do shed light on the fact that today's tradition of domestic work has parallels with, or even rests on, a social construct which enhances exploitation, inequality and the notion of race.

Many aspects and notions raised at the conference would be highly interesting to discuss in this conclusion. However, what I feel is the most important and problematic one is best captured in one participant's statement. A woman who shared her experiences with employing a domestic worker to care for her very ill daughter, said: “care is a dangerous relation. It allows one person to subdue to another.” The woman talked about the different power structures within a domestic household as a working environment, both that between the domestic and the person for whom she tends, as well as that between the domestic and her employer. Most importantly,

her statement highlights the history of domestic work as one of an imbalanced power relationship. When we take into consideration the presence of traces, echoes and shadows of the fantasy of the mammy figure in literature, a very serious problem with domestic work arises: the fantasy has the ability to enforce the imbalanced power relationship by obstructing the view of race and ethnic relations as socially constructed.

For the construct of the fantasy is in fact related to the notion of an *ignorance* of relationality. In her article on power relations as a product of, and strengthening by, ignorance, Sarah Lucia Hoagland shares very interesting thoughts. In any relationship, she says, there is a tendency to think of oppositions instead of similarities. One example is the opposite categories of slave and slave owner; however, as Hoagland states, “European settlers did not pre-exist as white slave owners not Yorubans as slaves” (97). In other words, in order to be labelled or named something, one is dependent upon a *relation* or contact with what is seen as the opposite. This interdependency and relation is often overshadowed by “an epistemology that presupposes autonomy and denies relationality between knower and unknown” (99). As a result, “we approach knowing those different from ourselves, [and] we are positioned to think non-relationality” (99). As such, we can speak of an *ignorance of relationality*. The effect of this system, then, is an epistemology of ignorance “which produces the ironic outcome that whites will generally be unable to understand the world they themselves have made” (Mills 18-19, qtd. in Hoagland 99).

Bringing these thought into reflections on the power relationship between the domestic worker and employer we find that it is indeed seen from the latter’s point of view as one of difference. And since the employer holds the power within this relationship, this view becomes the dominant one. When the domestic enters the work place, something happens. She enters a role. In this thesis’s literary analysis we have seen that the role is that of the fantasy. Interestingly, the introductory paragraphs to this conclusion illustrate that the fantasy is, to a

certain degree, also dominant in some real-life employers' perspectives of their domestics. The inequality with which they treat their domestics reveal the survival of the illusion, the fantasy, of racial hierarchy – a construction of which the mammy figure was a strong upholder. It seems, then, that the fantasy has the ability to take control of the mind and render the borderline between imagination and reality blurred. As such, the problem we have seen in the preceding analysis with representation is also present in real life, and functions as blinders for the realization that a fantasy is just that, a fantasy.

It seems that the very intimate, but also very ambiguous relationship between domestic and employer is the very quintessence of the ignorance of relationality. When taking a look at my notes from the conference, one quotation stands out in this respect. A member of the audience stated that what she felt was the greatest problem with the situation of domestic work, was that the domestic's role in the workspace is in essence one of *invisibility*. More precisely, the employer's expectations and demands to her domestic push her into a position where she is nearly unseen. Interestingly, this notion is also focused on in Hoagland's article. Hoagland focuses on María Lugones's interests "in those many cases in which White/Anglo women do one or more of the following to women of color: they ignore us, ostracize us, render us invisible, stereotype us (...). All of this *while we are in their midst*" (83, qtd. in Hoagland 100, italics in original). Arguably, this strengthens the notion of an "ignorance of relationality": if the domestic is expected to be invisible in the work environment, the employer will not be able to see their relationality. The expectation of invisibility functions as an enforcement of the ignorance of relations between domestic and employer.

This brings us back to *Imitation of Life*. We remember that Delilah struggled to present herself as a mother for her daughter, and did not succeed because her role as mammy overshadowed and eclipsed it, rendering it invisible for Peola. Bea too, is ignorant of Delilah's attempt to manifest her own persona instead of her role. She fails to regard Delilah as a friend,

a fellow mother and a business partner – a position which in essence made her success possible. Rather, Bea primarily sees Delilah as different from herself because of her skin colour and the mammy role that she is consequently placed in. Her view of Delilah is a figment of her own imagination, business sense, and superior position on the social ladder; but of this, Bea is ignorant²³.

In *Living Out*, we see a similar ignorance of relationality. One example is the discussed scene where Wallace interrogates Ana on her views on child upbringing (cf. p. 93 in this thesis). Wallace is unable to see the fact that Ana’s “correct” answers point to similarities in their mind sets, their views, and thus, arguably to a form of equality between them. What obstructs this realization is her presupposed view of Ana as a doméstica and a doméstica only, as well as her own constant awareness and underlining of her own position as a “superior.” Her focus on opposites leads to an ignorance of their relationalities.

There is, however, a positive development in the narrative structures of the contemporary works we have explored: both sides are given their say. In *Living Out* and *My Hollywood*, the focus and narration shifts between the employer and the doméstica respectively, and thus render visible several of their relations, and even similarities. There are several more examples of this in the works, and an analysis of this would be highly interesting as further research of the revitalization of the mammy figure in our present time. I suspect that what would come out of this is the same conclusion that I suggest here: the superior participant in the construction of racial hierarchy will be unable to see that the fantasy of the mammy figure – both in her original shape as well as her contemporary echoes– is an imagination, a fantasy, and

²³ In connection to this, it would be interesting to bring further the very brief suggestion in chapter 2 that the New Woman Ideal that Bea embodies can be understood as another *fantasy*. One possible argument to pursue in this context is the fantasy’s ability to maintain the status quo not only of Delilah’s role as a mammy, but also for Bea’s “superior” position. The understanding of the New Woman Ideal as a fantasy would provide us with a possible reading for Bea’s ignorance of their relationality, and thus why the social distance between the two is maintained.

not real. Subsequently, she fails to see their relations and the fact that the doméstica's "inferiority" is an illusion.

América's Dream is an exception from the two other works' visualization of the ignorance of relationality. The story is told from the perspective of the character of América only, and the reader is informed of her feelings of injustice and inequality as a result of her employer's treatment of her. However, in this criticism of social and racial hierarchy within the domestic sphere, the focus lies on distance rather than relations. The novel does not move deeply enough into its criticism to display racial hierarchy as a social construct; it criticizes its presence only. This is quite a disturbing notion when taking into consideration popular culture's representation of domestic workers as consolidating the continuation of the fantasy. In contemporary TV-series and films, the doméstica is stereotypically portrayed, and as such, the distance to her employer is emphasized. This strengthens the ignorance of their relationality because the focus lies on oppositions rather than similarities.

The role that the domestic worker steps into when entering the home of her employer, is not only one of invisibility in the domestic sphere, but also one that entails making invisible, erasing and obscuring her own identity. As we have seen in the Doméstic novels, however, there is often no actual distance between employer and employee. Often, the employer and domestic are both mothers, wanting the best for their children, having the same intentions for their children, sharing some similar views on the world. What divides them, then, is nothing but the social construction of race – of skin colour. From this understanding of invisibility a question arises, one that points to the hopelessness of the situation: when a demand of invisibility is placed upon the domestic worker, how can the employer open up her eyes for her own ignorance of their relationality?

As a response to the conference participant's statement that the domestic must be invisible, one participant said: "Making yourself invisible is the first step in making yourself

non-existing.” This echoes the discussion in chapter 3 on how the employers’ staging and framing render the *domésticas* no room for agency or opposition (cf. p. 75-76 in this thesis). Simpson’s character of Lola made her objection to Helen’s staging clear to the reader, but not to Helen herself. She kept her own feelings hidden, imperceptible, and invisible. Similarly, as we remember from chapter 3, the employers disapproved of any feature not belonging to the “profile,” or the role, and saw it as an “otherness.” This way of erasing anything outside the profile is a way of making invisible and non-existing the identity of the *doméstica*. When concentrating the *doméstica* into their role, onto the site of the fantasy, they are in a sense still regarded as “Others,” precisely because they are *domésticas*. This staging is interesting in relation to popular culture representation of the *doméstica*. She is typically portrayed as an immigrant woman making funny and silly comments with her broken English. The social and ethnic distance to her employer is striking, and a visualization of her erases everything not pertaining to the stereotype.

At this point I wish to make a note on one important aspect of my thesis. In many ways, what comes out of reading Hoagland’s article is how very powerful, dramatic and dangerous the act of representation can be. Many may find the parallels, relations and similarities I identify between the mammy figure and the *doméstica* quite problematic in the sense that the two are, in a way, placed within the same sore and painful frame. I do not, however, intend to collapse the Latina *doméstica* into the same representation as that of the mammy figure. What I aim to do is, in Foucault’s words, “make visible all of those discontinuities that cross us” (162, qtd. in Dillon “Reinscribing” 254). My reading rejects the assumed absence or “discontinuity” of the literary representation of the mammy figure and reveals instead its continuity. And perhaps this reading and the revelation of traces of the mammy figure may raise an important awareness in relation to the contemporary literary representation of the *doméstica* by “irritating” and disrupting the perpetuation.

It is my hope that the ongoing focus and campaigns advocating increased rights for domestic workers may also lead to an increase in the literary field of what I call Domestic novels. This has several potential consequences. If these works continue to bring forth the legacy of the mammy figure through a visualization of the demands and expectations of the employers, the mammy figure will in one way continue to live on. However, as I argue above, an awareness of the relationality of these two figures is important in order to disrupt its perpetuation.

In conclusion I would like to mention the play *Nanay*, which focuses on the consequences and very dramatic backsides of the working domestic in Canada. It is written by Alexander Ferguson and directed by Geraldine Pratt in collaboration with the Philippine Women Centre of British Columbia. *Nanay* is based on interviews and dialogues with Filipina immigrant domestics and their children, transcribed into a “testimonial theatre” where “verbatim monologues taken from interviews conducted over a 15 year period with domestic workers, their children and Canadian employers” (“Nanay”)²⁴. The domestics’ children reflect especially well the consequences of having their mothers working abroad, namely a lost connection to them. This notion reveals the repercussions of the entire situation of domestic work. The woman on each side of the power relationship of domestic work meet in the role that the testimony focuses on, namely being a mother. It reveals a sinister and realistic echo of the mammy figure in the domestics’ involuntary neglect of their own children as a consequence of taking care of those of their employers. The play reveals the reality of several of the literary works I have focused on in this thesis, and bridges sociology and aesthetics.

Langhorne’s 1922 words that “Mammy is one of that infinitely lovable and fast disappearing people – the old-time Southern negro” are now, almost a century after they were written, incorrect. At the time, the fantasy of the mammy figure was not at all “fast

²⁴ Reviews of, and further information on, the play, can be found in Johnston and Pratt’s “Nanay (Mother)” and “Translating Research,” as well as in Lazaridis Ferguson.

disappearing,” neither from literature nor from reality. And neither is she now. However, contemporary literary representations on the domestic worker is scarce. We are surrounded by popular culture portrayals of the domestic worker that contain disturbing echoes of the mammy figure, but few novels or plays. During the conference, I raised the question of why this is so. I received no answer. Nobody knew. I therefore wish to raise another question: why are we not *inquisitive* of the fact that there are so few contemporary literary representations on domestic workers when she is so often seen in popular culture?

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