

COLORBLIND VS. TECHNICOLOR:

INTERROGATING THE KITCHEN SPACE IN KATHRYN STOCKETT'S *THE HELP*

By Tracy Sweetbaum

Kathryn Stockett's novel *The Help* has been criticized for its petty attempt to portray the truth of white and black women in Jackson, Mississippi in 1960. Critics attack Stockett's choice to write in black dialect without also incorporating the "twang" of white southerners.

In a review titled "The Road More Traveled" by Erin Aubrey Kaplan, she addresses this criticism with some provoking rhetorical questions, "Why must blacks speak dialect to be authentic? Why are Stockett's white characters free of the linguistic quirks that white Southerners certainly have?" While Stockett's decision of controversial dialect may gloss over the bigger racial questions and issues within 1960's Jackson, the inclusion of food and the conversations enabled around food allows readers to experience the complexities within Southern racism. On the surface level, the informality and colloquialism that Stockett uses to discuss food may seem to reaffirm some critics' beliefs that *The Help* is just a light read, perfect for a book club but not for the larger critical conversation on race. I will argue against this seemingly lighthearted gloss as I prove that the food scenes and dialogue delve deep

into the cultural history of the South, both perpetuating racism and allowing for an at times romanticized and at times real space of equality.

Critics throughout Southern history have idealized the preparation and eating of food as a space of equality between African Americans and Anglo Saxon peoples in the South. They argue that this constructed space of equality has roots in the diverse origin and heritage of what Americans now consider to be Southern food. In John Shelton Reed's essay "Southern Eats" he states, "The South's political history, like those of most peoples, has been largely a sorry chronicle of division, conflict, oppression and exploitation, but the regions cultural history has been more a matter of borrowing, sharing swapping, and mutual influence- across racial lines" (*Dixie Emporium*, 206). The food of many cultures is the product of mixing and Southern food is especially mixed. In John Egerton's book *Southern Food: At Home, On the Road, In History* he states, "the food is not just Southern; in a historical sense, at least, it is also Indian, British, African, Hispanic, Creole, Acadian, French, German, Italian, even Asian" (5). This mixing began as early as 1607 when the Powhatan peoples introduced the first European settlers of Jamestown to what we now know as corn.

In addition to the indigenous ingredients of the Americas, a large portion of what is now considered Southern food is a result of the Atlantic Slave Trade and the introduction of African ingredients and cooking techniques. Europeans quickly learned that Africans fared better on the Middle Passage when they ate native food from Africa. Since their health was vital to their ability to work, provisions were made to include corn, yam, malagueta pepper, and palm oil. Once the Africans arrived in America they continued to eat and cook with African ingredients and techniques as "the choice of particular foods and particular means of preparation involved issues of crucial importance to the slaves sense of identity" (Hall 31). The mixing involved in the creation of the genre of Southern food gives food a power. Southerners accept, embrace, and celebrate the combining of unlikely ingredients.

Southern food would not exist without its strong diverse roots, adding to the food of the South's ability to leave us temporarily "colorblind".

The current accepted definition of the term colorblind, referring to its figurative meaning with reference to race or ethnicity has been in existence since 1866. The OED's definition states, "taking no note of differences in racial color, in sex, etc" ("Colorblind" def. b). One of the examples in the OED is, "Neither in the Dutch republics nor in the English colonies is the law absolutely colorblind as between Black and White" ("Colorblind" def. b). While the word colorblind has an understood and accepted meaning of people's ability to ignore racial implications, the practice and implementation of colorblindness in society never actually occurs. One can grasp the concept, and maybe superficially aim to achieve it, but in a world where race defines almost every facet of our everyday lives, it is almost impossible to take no note of differences in racial color.

The realm of cooking and food production is where critics such as Edgerton believe food has the ability to render people temporarily colorblind. Edgerton states, "...The kitchen was one of the few places where their (slave cooks) imagination and skill could have free rein and full expression and there they often excelled" (14). Yet this is not entirely true. The preparation and cooking enabled blacks to use their imagination and create a sense of identity but the space in which they actually cook and create is not colorblind. The kitchen, which Edgerton is referring to, belonged to the white masters, where everything from available ingredients to provided utensils were controlled by the dominant whites. In Anne Tentsch's article *"Excavating the South's African American Food History"* she highlights the importance of thinking of food in terms of space. "The overall space immediately surrounding the big house was one of heightened awareness. Here the master of a well-run plantation fully governed what was allowed and what was not" (Tentsch 64). The control and power generated from the racial dynamics of slave and master within the white kitchen evolved over time. But the white kitchen remains a space where colorblind like

practices can occur but in which no one can ever fully escape the overarching unfair racial power differences.

Kathryn Stockett's novel *The Help*, tells the stories of three different women living in Jackson, Mississippi in the 1960's. Stockett weaves the lives of black domestic workers, their white employers, and one white woman searching for justice and equality together. A main character in the novel is Aibileen, an older black maid who is kind and nurturing. She is currently raising Mae Mobley Leefolt, her seventeenth white child and also mourning the loss of her own son, Treelore. Mae Mobley's mother is Elizabeth Leefolt, a societal Jackson lady more concerned with her social life than anything to do with raising her child. Aibileen is Mae Mobley's main maternal figure and most of their relationship portrayed in the novel revolves around Aibileen and Mae Mobley in the kitchen.

Aibileen describes how the kitchen acts as a safe-ground for herself and Mae Mobley. "We go in the kitchen and I fix her baloney sandwich. In the driveway, the workmen is setting in they truck, eating their own lunches. I'm glad for the peace. I smile over at Baby Girl, give her a strawberry, so grateful I was here during the trouble with her mama. I hate to think what would a happen if I wasn't. She stuff the strawberry in her mouth, smile back. I think she feel it too" (Stockett 19). In this scene, Aibileen is still "serving" the white child, but there is an act of love and nurturing that separate titles of "black help" and "white baby", and readers are left with adult caregiver and innocent child. Food has the ability to enable situations that temporarily foster a naïve and childlike innocence. It may be only for a moment but it still occurs.

The relationship between Aibileen and Mae Mobley is genuine and throughout the novel readers can see how much Mae Mobley truly respects and loves Aibileen. However, this relationship is only allowed to exist because of the innocence of children, before they grow up and learn the established correct social constructions of race and class in Jackson Stockett writes, "Aibileen, she moves on

to another job when the babies get too old and stop being color-blind” (Stockett 128). Eventually, compounded with the reality of societal norms, food is not enough to keep us colorblind. Yet, its ability to do so, even for a brief moment has enough power to trick our minds into wanting to believe in the romanticized notions of equality.

In contrast to Aibileen, Stockett constructs a different main character in the novel named Minny, a loud-mouthed and hearty black woman known as the best cook in Jackson, but who is constantly fired for talking back to her white employers. Minny finds herself working for Miss Celia, a “white trash” woman who has married into an old Jackson family. Miss Celia cannot cook and what she wants mostly from Minny is to learn and simultaneously be able to pass off Minny’s cooking as her own to impress her husband. The relationship between Minny and Miss Celia superficially supports Edgerton’s notion that the food of the South belongs to everyone and can break down the barriers of race.

Minny begins teaching Miss Celia how to transforming from “the help” into a knowledgeable teacher. Traditionally, African American slaves cooked and prepared the food for their white masters, but then were not allowed to eat this food. “A basic division (with some overlap) existed during slavery between food that the cook, usually an African American slave, prepared for the white master’s family and that she or he prepared for the African American field worker” (Whit 51). Rendering a space in which both women enjoy the same food together is especially important. The women can concurrently enjoy the simplicity of good food and forget the reality of their true place in the outside world. Minny says, “Real careful, I lay the dark meat in the pan. It bubbles up like a song and we watch the thighs and legs turn brown. I look over and Miss Celia’s smiling at me” (Stockett 44). Stockett uses the pronoun “we” and unites these women, allowing them to celebrate Minny’s delicious cooking equally.

While this relationship seems to support the claim that the food of the South belongs to all of its residents, Stockett does not permit this idea to develop fully. The novel characterizes Miss Celia constantly as naïve and childlike, creating an almost parallel relationship to that of Aibileen and Mae Mobley. The black women are supportive and caregivers and the white child and white woman welcome and embrace their support, however, once the white character steps out of the kitchen these equal relationships fall back into the categories of black help and white employer. Minny again states, “Or at least I cook and Miss Celia fidgets, looking more like a five-year-old than the rich lady paying my rent” (Stockett 48). Only when the outside economic and power differences are not fully developed and understood can food enable this simplistic world of pure joy, no matter what race is consuming it.

Miss Celia’s kitchen does act, as neutral ground for both races yet, it still remains a strictly segregated space. Minny discusses the rules of being a maid, rules she learned from her mother and rules she will probably pass down to her daughter. Her mother says, “Rule Number Three: when you’re cooking white people’s food, you taste it with a different spoon. You put that spoon to your mouth, think nobody’s looking, put it back in the pot, might as well throw it out. Rule Number Four: you use the same cup, same fork, same plate every day. Keep it in a separate cupboard and tell that white woman that’s the one you’ll use from here on out. Rule Number Five: you eat in the kitchen” (39). Even though the actual food has its roots and history in a blended construction of cultures the problematic racist notions of the South live within the traditions and consumption of the food. The kitchen proposes a conundrum: in one sense it is a place where the mixing of race and culture is applauded and accepted yet in another it is just another space that has clearly marked signs of “separate but equal.”

The control white families held over their black domestic employees allowed slavery like practices to continue within the South. These rooted slavery practices

and creation of the blended and mixed genre of Southern food took place before the Civil War. Yet, during the time of reconstruction, and when the terms such as “lost cause” and “new south” were born, is when the south’s struggle to maintain some sense of identity initiated the many traditions and ways of life that were certainly prominent during the 1960’s and even linger throughout Southern homes to the present day. In Grace Elizabeth Hale’s book, *Making Whiteness*, she states,

White southern men and women of the rising middle class, however, insisted on conflating the plantation household and post-Reconstruction white home in order to ground their own cultural authority within the power- which by the late nineteenth century had grown to mythical proportions- of the plantation-based planter class. And images of integrated domesticity were central to this fiction of continuity as African American servants, symbolized and idealized most frequently as mammy, replaced slaves (Hale 87).

White Southern men kept the racial codes strictly enforced through violence and law. The women, black and white, were put in a position where they had to negotiate and perform these complicated plantation roles. The interactions that took place within the home and especially within the kitchen, were crucial in defining both black and white women’s sense of identity and how they came to terms with both identifying what race meant for themselves and in relation to others.

Stockett manipulates the different power dynamics between that of a white woman employer and her black domestic help. The relationship that progresses the most is of the one between Minny and Miss Celia. Stockett fosters a sense of power switching between the two women when Miss Celia wants to learn from Minny and enables Minny to be her teacher within her own kitchen. Yet, Stockett freezes this power play by asserting that Miss Celia’s economic power far outweighs Minny’s talents in the kitchen. For if anything was to go wrong, Miss Celia is the one who controls Minny’s most valuable resource, her paycheck.

Minny does not like Miss Celia's attempt to create this colorblind world within her home. Minny states, "Go shopping then. Go get you some new clothes. Go do whatever white women do when the maid's home" (Stockett 51). In this relationship, Minny embraces her mammy/servant role. Not necessarily because it is her life passion, but because it is what she knows and it is safer. She gets time to herself and can be herself without Celia looking over her shoulder. The uncomfortable emotion Minny elicits magnifies the complexities within the different distributions of power. In one sense, Minny is a strong, loud-mouthed back talking woman, unafraid of the consequences her harsh words will cause. Stockett epitomizes this fearless brashness when Minny in reference to the iconic *Gone With the Wind* dress scene states, "If I'd played Mammy, I'd of told Scarlett to stick those green draperies up her white little pooper. Make her own damn man-catching dress" (Stockett 50). Yet this quotation is only one page before Minny wants Miss Celia to leave the house so she can quietly perform her domestic duties.

The role of the black mammy/black domestic worker is one of the main reasons racist segregated practices within Southern households were allowed to exist. Minny understands the ultimate power she will never obtain and utter subservience she has to comply with if she remains in the Mammy role. With Miss Celia gone, she can simply do her job and receive pay without the constant reminders of slavery like power hierarchies that still linger in her modern day life. Miss Celia thinks she is acting as a progressive woman who does not let the racial differences influence how she treats Minny. Although Miss Celia does not consciously try to highlight her dominant role over Minny it will always exist. Minny does not want Miss Celia to make a Mammy out of her, she simply wants to work and not have any personal relationship. Including this resistance from Minny in contrast to Miss Celia's desires to ignore race, prove that breaking down these rigid roles and practices is not so simple and idealistic.

Interestingly, Minny's verbal resistance to the Mammy role seems contradictory to how Stockett has physically construed her in the novel. "Minny short and big, got shiny black curls. She setting with her legs splayed, her thick arms crossed" (Stockett 13). Minny is the quintessential stereotypical black Mammy through her appearance. In spite of this, Stockett is not trying to reaffirm black and white women in their stereotypical confined spaces. She is playing with performance and challenging her readers to dig deeper than what she provides on the surface. Yes, Minny is "this figure, with large breasts, muscular arms, and wide hips, an idealized representation of an autonomous black woman..." (Bower 4), but she is also smart, brash, and much more complicated than previously constructed Mammy figures whose only purpose was to serve whites.

Minny and Miss Celia represent Stockett's imagination, her play of what if's within the confines of Miss Celia's "colorblind" home. Miss Celia's home is physically isolated from the other white women's homes in the novel and this aims to further separate the possible colorblind world from that of the reality of what many relationships between white women and black domestic help were really like. Minny's plea for Miss Celia to go and do something outside of the home, while the black domestic maid works inside of the home, is based on every other maid/employer relationship she previously had. White women were used to being confined in a subservient role to their husbands. Having a place outside of the home, whether it is socializing with friends or getting involved in charity organizations was a main source of empowerment and freedom. However, this freedom often led to the white women continuing racist practices because they wanted to keep the power they maintained over black domestic workers.

Wealthy and middle class white women had freedom to go to meetings, play bridge and other activities outside of the home. Stockett exemplifies this freedom in the many scenes when the white women get together for their Junior League meetings. At the meetings, led by Miss Hilly, an extremely racist and manipulative

woman, the women discuss planning for a big Junior League event as well as other initiatives they would like to see take place, all the while drinking tea and eating caramel cake prepared by the help. Grace Elizabeth Hale exemplifies the emphasis on Southern culture that emerged because of the ability white women had to have a life outside of the home, due to the work black domestics did inside the home. She states,

Leaving their households, women developed new social relations and values in associations that they later used in constructing the child-centered, middle-class home. And women constructed these new domestic spaces as refuges from the frenzied pace of male market life. What economic activity remained within the middle-class household and clothing preparation and the cleaning of furnishes and clothing- disappeared from the view through a process the historian Jeanne Boydston has called “the pastoralization of housework” (Hale 92).

Now white women were able to leave the home and build substantial meaning for themselves, enabling themselves to become their male dominant husbands to their black maids. The maids were then trapped inside of the home and left to perform all aspects of the “Southern lady”. Even though these white women strived for the ability to become more equal to the dominant males they did not want to let go of the notion that the lady runs the home. In this instance, the black maids in the kitchen enabled white women to do it all; compete with men in the sphere outside of the home and still look as if they themselves maintained the home, cooked the food and cared for the children.

One of the central initiatives Miss Hilly is trying to enforce is her bathroom initiative. She believes the black help have germs and diseases that will spread to the white families if they share the same toilet. Stockett juxtaposes this initiative, about sanitation and bathroom activities with constant images of delicious food. The

women seem to have no problem ingesting the food prepared by the black help, but when it comes to releasing all of a sudden they are worried about cross contamination. The bathroom initiative is also the first time the central white woman character, Miss Skeeter, becomes aware of just how unjust life in Jackson, Mississippi can be. Miss Skeeter describes an epiphany she felt when asked to write about the bathroom initiative for the Junior League newspaper.

The metaphor Stockett uses compares Skeeter to none other than food. “When I started typing out the bathroom initiative for the newsletter, typing words like disease and protect yourself and you’re welcome!, it was like something cracked open inside of me, not unlike a watermelon, cool and soothing and sweet. I always thought insanity would be a dark, bitter feeling, but it is drenching and delicious if you really roll around in it” (Stockett 345). Writing is Skeeter’s passion and through this medium she is getting excited and awakened, however the feeling of insanity she is describing is not sheer passion for writing. It is the first time she has had the chance to remove herself from the situation, breath, and realize the deep and twisted racist society she is a part of.

Stockett then compares Skeeter’s feeling of liberation to a watermelon, a delicious Southern treat often found at family barbeques of all races. Watermelon, also not coincidentally is one of the foods brought to America from Africa. It is uncertain of precisely how and when African-domesticated watermelon was cultivated in North America but geographers and botanists agree that the watermelon was originally domesticated in West Africa. Shortly after Africans introduced watermelon to North American, people of both white and black races cherished the watermelon. Anne Ritson loved the watermelon so much she dedicated one of her poems just to the African fruit.

The watermelon most they love,
I never could the fruit approve;
It was so very light and sweet,

It did not seem as fit to eat,
Melting so quickly in the mouth,
Like syllabub and trifle froth;
Yet during autumn's sultry air,
Its coolness was delicious fare. (Hall 31)

Skeeter's metaphor may seem insignificant at first, and just a way for Stockett to utilize literary devices to make the plot seem more interesting. However, Skeeter's metaphor, like the larger symbolism within the novel uses Southern food imagery, imagery that seems inherently to belong to white southerners but in actuality is tied to a more nuanced heritage, one that began as African and then was transformed to be a product of the American South.

Hilly's bathroom initiative aims to protect white Southerners from the black others. This initiative is important to Hilly because it outwardly establishes a boundary within the white home and again is an assertion of white dominance and power over the black domestic workers. However, Hilly is so adamant about this initiative because it is a tangible action stating that the white home is not a place where racial mixing takes place. This strong attitude is really just a reaction to how large of a role the white home actually did play with racial mixing and therefore creating racial identity. Hale states, "Thus even as segregation became policy in the late nineteenth-century South, the white home continued as a site of racial mixing through the employment of African American domestic labor. The white home became a central site for the production and reproduction of racial identity precisely because it remained a space of integration within an increasingly segregated world" (Hale 94). The action going on inside the kitchen was extremely intimate and mixed, as evident by the relationships such as between Aibileen and Mae Mobley. However, all the unspoken rules and fears of contamination remained because of the realities of segregation in 1960's Jackson. White women such as Hilly were spending so much

energy fighting this mixing yet at the same time the main force responsible for it was within their own homes.

While food writers and historians like Edgerton and Reed outwardly accept that the product of Southern food is a combination of many cultures and heavily influenced by African cultures, other American inhabitants of the South do not like to admit these facts openly. In Robert L. Hall's essay, *Food Crops and the Slave Trade* he states, "How 'African' all Americans are is conventionally hidden by the assumption that, under conditions of oppression, acculturation is a one-way street (*African American Foodways* 18). Characters such as Hilly fight so hard to keep the boundaries between blacks and whites clear and concrete. Yet, while Hilly is preaching to her peers about the importance of separate bathrooms and protecting "clean" whites from the "dirty" blacks her children are tucked away in the other room, in a confined intimate space playing, laughing and learning from their most maternal figure, the maid. Stockett juxtaposes Hilly, a contradictory white character who is comfortable with the previous social constructions of race to Miss Skeeter.

Skeeter grew up in the same environment with Hilly and they even went to the same college but Skeeter is rejecting the dominant patriarchal white society and sensing a greater connection and celebration of the African influences in her life. Like the many white children in *The Help*, Skeeter's relationship with her own maid was her main source of encouragement and genuine love. Skeeter may be Stockett's answer to Aibileen's fears of children losing their ability to be colorblind as well as a somewhat autobiographical figure.

The sweet darkness and insanity that Skeeter verbalized after writing about the bathroom initiative may have been a personal epiphany, but Skeeter has actually been living and dealing with this "insanity" her entire life. Stockett dedicates many pages to describing the beautiful and loving relationship Skeeter had with her own maid, Constantine. Skeeter says, "I woke up nearly every day to her standing in the kitchen, Preacher Green playing on the radio that sat on the kitchen table. The

minute she saw me, she smiled. “Good morning, beautiful girl!” I’d sit at the kitchen table and tell her what I’d dreamed. She claimed dreams told the future” (Stockett 63). Skeeter, born Eugenia Phelan, always felt like an outsider, as she was both physically and verbally ostracized from her family. She describes how she received her nickname stating, “When I was born, my older brother, Carlton, looked at me and declared to the hospital room, “It’s not a baby, it’s a skeeter!” and from there the name stuck. I was long and leggy and mosquito-thin, a record-breaking twenty-five inches at Baptist Hospital. The name grew even more accurate with my pointy, beak-like nose when I was a child. Mother’s spent my entire life trying to convince people to call me by my given name, Eugenia” (Stockett 57).

Stockett’s choice to nickname Eugenia, Skeeter is extremely important. Firstly, her own family declared her as an insect, a lowly creature that depends on others to survive. Skeeter, while she certainly loves her family, never feels a true connection to them and Constantine is the constant source of a nurturing adult figure that teaches Skeeter it is okay to be different. Secondly, not only does a mosquito depend on other living organisms to survive, but it most importantly depends on the blood of other organisms to mix with its own to sustain life. The mixing of food was celebrated, but the mixing of blood or miscegenation is at the root of most racist fears. And while whites despised the notion of mixing blood, creating actual laws such as the 1/16th law, to blacks miscegenation was an assertion of power and regaining of the control whites fight so hard to keep for themselves. Hale states, “And one of the most crucial forms of this cultural freedom was the right to draw from both sides of the color line whites had erected, to stake out the muddled middle and claim a “miscegenated” style” (Hale 38). Creating Skeeter as a creature that thrives on miscegenation proves that this mixing is positive.

The kitchen in the Phelan household asserts something different than both the Leefolt kitchen and Miss Celia’s kitchen. The Phelan’s kitchen remains a white kitchen with the same unspoken rules and control distinctions already established.

Constantine is still serving the subservient black domestic worker role, yet her wisdom and advice are Skeeter's main source of sanity. Skeeter does grow up to learn the social constructions and rules of Jackson, Mississippi, but what resonates with her the most is what happens inside the kitchen, regardless of her friends, family and other members of Jackson society. For once, Stockett enables the genuine and somewhat equal relationship between white and black women to grow. Just because Skeeter is growing up, does not mean she too stops being colorblind. Skeeter states, "I learned that socks are stealthier transportation than shoes. I learned to use the back door. I learned to wear hats, cover my face with my hands when I passed by. But mostly, I learned to just stay in the kitchen" (Stockett 64). Skeeter is referring to the acts of being a civilized lady that she learned to live amicably in the same household as her mother. But the comfort and ability to act as her true self within the kitchen is not merely an escape from her controlling hegemonic mother, she is delving into the world of possibilities created within the kitchen. Possibilities that stem from the mixing not only literally of the food Constantine creates, but from the loving relationship that focus more on internal qualities, then anything to do with race.

Skeeter experienced harsh name-calling and verbal torture, not because of her race but still because of her appearance. Stockett is not claiming that Skeeter went through the same hurt and pain that blacks in 1960's Jackson went through, but because she was constantly considered an outsider she has the ability to empathize with blacks that other white characters in the novel lack. Also, ironically the only way Skeeter was able to get past the harsh words of her peers was through Constantine, and the advice she learned in the kitchen. Skeeter is reflecting on the first time she remembers someone calling her ugly and she states,

Constantine sat down next to me, at the kitchen table. I heard the cracks of her swollen joints. She pressed her thumb hard into the palm of my hand, something we both knew meant *Listen. Listen to me.*

“Ever morning, until you dead in the ground, you gone have to make this decision.” Constantine was so close, I could see the blackness of her gums. “*You have to ask yourself, Am I gone believe what them fools say about me today?*” (Stockett 63)

Every time, Constantine’s immeasurable wisdom is conveyed, Stockett includes some reference to the kitchen. Stockett, in the Phelan kitchen is exploring even more the notion that black women actually held the power within the kitchen. Yet, again this development is halted; Mrs. Phelan fires Constantine while Skeeter is away at school and she refuses to tell her why. Now, when Skeeter returns home from college she no longer has the love and support from Constantine in the kitchen. Skeeter now has to go to another space, Aibileen’s kitchen.

In conjunction with Skeeter realizing the inequities through Hilly’s bathroom initiative she is also forming a relationship with Aibileen. Skeeter gets a job writing for a local Jackson paper where she has to write a column about household work, providing readers with answers to problems as well as providing tips. Since, Skeeter has no experience with domestic work she turns to Aibileen for advice and the tools to perform domestic work, subsequently the tools to perform as the black domestic workers in the novel.

Stockett understands the complexities within the power distribution between white and blacks as well as the importance the white home and kitchen had within all the above relationships. The white kitchen was a place of racial mixing and where white children at first fostered pure loving relationships and then quickly learned the meaning of whiteness and blackness. The white kitchen was a place of power where even though the white woman was not in the physical space of the kitchen, the action going on in the white kitchen granted them power. They both controlled what the black women did inside of their own kitchens and were granted a life outside of the kitchen. The white kitchen was also a place where slavery practices continued and the plantation lifestyle was maintained. Stockett creates relationships within

these white kitchens that both perform equality and segregation. However, the actions within the black kitchen are where Stockett truly begins to manipulate the dynamics of white and black women. Inside Aibileen's kitchen readers are privy to a world where the food and kitchen act as contested space.

In addition to the relationships between Aibileen and Mae Mobley, Minny and Miss Celia, Hilly's bathroom initiative and the relationship between Skeeter and Constantine, a central part of the plot is when Skeeter, Aibileen, Minny and other black domestic workers join together to write a book exposing the truths of what life was really like for the black help. The writing of this novel, takes place in secret meetings for a long period of time, all within Aibileen's kitchen. Skeeter tries to begin writing the novel in an insignificant room in Aibileen's house. Even though the women are on the same page, there is awkward tension, and nothing actually gets accomplished. When they meet again, Skeeter makes a plea to work in her most comfortable environment, the kitchen. "Could we...sit in the kitchen this time? I ask. Would you mind" (Stockett 149)? In Marcia Blumberg's article, "Domestic Place as Contestatory Space: the Kitchen as Catalyst and Crucible" she explores the roles of white and black women within the kitchen and the importance of authors transforming the kitchen from a place of ideal domesticity to a place of progression and change. In reference to Bobby Baker's *Kitchen Show* and Jeanne Goosen's *Kitchen Blues* she exposes how these women manipulate kitchen norms and "expose and resist stereotypical representations of domesticity and the normative positioning of a woman in the kitchen" (Bobby Baker and Jeanne Goosen qtd. in Blumberg 195). Stockett is doing the same thing within Aibileen's kitchen. There is never any mention of domestic chores, housework or even cooking aside from making tea within Aibileen's kitchen. Aibileen's kitchen is not for food, slavery like practices or rules, it is for unlikely women joining together to challenge the dominant society.

While Aibileen's kitchen lacks food, Stockett incorporates actions and products normally found in a kitchen in other ways. For example, Skeeter wants to

interview another black woman, Eula, but Aibileen knows getting Eula to sufficiently tell her story will be difficult. Aibileen says to Skeeter, “Now, Eula, she gone be like prying a dead clam open” (Stockett 255). Stockett also mentions Skeeter fiercely using her hands, yet instead of chopping or peeling she is typing. Blumberg finds the same instances of the author marking actions with utensils or objects associated with the kitchen and says, “such markings defamiliarize the ordinary and everyday to provoke new perhaps disturbing insight” (197). The kitchen, which has previously been such an immanent aspect of proving gendered, stereotyped and racist like practices still occur, is now transformed into this progressive and forward thinking space. Taking actions and objects from the kitchen, objects and actions that in chapters before reiterate a rigid social construction is Stockett’s way of slowly challenging readers to let go of these previous notions. However, Stockett still grounds this space within reality. Aibileen’s kitchen is not just a fantasy vision aimed to, “operate to re-s/cite a domestic place as multivalent space and to revision kitchen practices and product” (198). Stockett still includes the disturbing but extremely apparent fears these women shared by risking their lives to simply record the truth. She also acknowledges the resistance many of the black help expressed, some because they doubted a white woman, accurately telling their story as well as not having an ulterior motive and that these black women didn’t necessarily want to be activists fighting for equal rights.

Even though Minny is supportive of the book writing throughout the entire process she is the character who expresses the most opposition, not opposition with telling her story but confusion as to what the book was actually aiming to accomplish. Minny states, “I don’t care about eating at a counter with white people. What I care about is, if ten years a white lady will call my girls dirty and accuse them of stealing the silver” (Stockett 218). This statement leads readers to question the point of the book. Is it to gain rights and equality or simply stating how life is? The point, however, is not really important because Stockett is still proving that the black

kitchen fosters an environment where black and white women can finally express themselves, not necessarily to enact changes.

Life inside Aibileen's kitchen, even with the fears and resistance is not exactly a colorblind space, but a space in which color does not govern every day actions. It is a space that readers and the characters in the book cherish but a space that still does not really work within reality. Skeeter says, "I guess I got to go, I say, even though I'd rather spend the rest of my life right here in Aibileen's cozy little kitchen" (313). The messages within the novel may seem confusing as not one relationship stands to trump all. Readers root for the relationships between Aibileen and Mae Mobley and Skeeter and Constantine, readers shun from the pages describing Hilly and the Junior League and readers are left questioning what roles they believe Minny and Miss Celia should obtain. Yet within all the fantasy like romanticized claims, Stockett continually interjects aspects of reality and confusion. Minny states, "See, I think if God had intended for white people and colored people to be this close together for so much of the day, he would've made us colorblind" (215). *The Help*, similarly to the book written inside the novel, is not aimed to be a plea for civil rights activism. Stockett, aware of the criticism and disdain for her choice to write in black dialect states, "I was scared a lot of the time, that I was crossing a terrible line, writing in the voice of a black person. I was afraid I would fail to describe a relationship that was so intensely influential in my life, so loving, so grossly stereotyped in American history and literature. *The Help* is important when discussing the larger discussion on race in the American South, not because of what it aims to be pretend to be or because of the accuracy of historical events but because of its ability to intimately portray the many complicated relationships, hardships, and realities that both black and white women underwent in the South.

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