

Poop, Pie, & Politics in *The Help*: Rescuing the (Literary) Body from Political Obsolescence

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Abstract

This essay explores the literary effect of digestional tropes in Kathryn Stockett's novel *The Help* as they signify and construct identity. In light of Stockett's ethos of racial equality and interracial coalition among women, this essay investigates the ways in which these tropes forge and define interracial relationships among characters. Leaning upon the psychoanalytical feminist theory of Elizabeth Grosz in her work *Volatile Bodies* (1994), this essay considers the integrated and mutually-constitutive nature of the mind/body relationship. Furthermore, Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection underscores the importance of the "other" vis-à-vis waste as endemic to identity construction, whether personally, interpersonally, or socially. Ultimately, engaging Michael Kreyling's Möbius strip logic of memory-and-history in self-revision, this essay argues that *The Help* affords literary and cultural scholars with an access point to explore contemporary U.S. American identity as it is constructed through popular, albeit problematic, media.

Keywords: *body, U.S. South, Civil Rights, women, food*

Apéritif: Kathryn Stockett's Place at the (Academic) Table

In the summer of 2011, a certain 530-page paperback in vintage yellow began to infest airports, beach chairs, and nightstands across the United States. Best friends swapped it. Book clubs adopted it. Racial justice groups denounced it. As book sales soared, Hollywood set to work on a star-studded adaptation. By the time Dreamworks/Touchstone premiered their interpretation of Kathryn Stockett's *The Help* (2009), mainstream hype surrounding the film recalled the epic adaptation of Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1939).¹ And like Mitchell's now-canonical southern tale, *The Help* also enjoyed extensive popular acclaim for its "attention to historical detail, dialect, and characterization [that] creates a beautiful portrait of a fragmenting world".²

Conversely, these same literary elements – the "historical detail, dialect, and

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¹ *The Help*. Directed by Tate Taylor. Performed by Emma Stone, Viola Davis, and Octavia Spencer. (Universal City, CA: Dreamworks/Touchstone Pictures, 2011). DVD.

² Sarah Sacha Dollacker, "Segregation Tale Describes Bond of Women," review of *The Help*, by Kathryn Stockett, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, February 1, 2009, Arts & Leisure.

characterization” – elicited a very different response within scholarly discussion. One of the first compelling and definitive examples of scholarly response was offered by the Association of Black Women Historians shortly before the movie’s release. The ABWH criticized the novel’s “lack of attention” to historical details surrounding “civil rights activism”.³ For example, the ABWH decried the novel’s representation of Medger Evers’s assassination, which figures a crucial historical landmark of the U.S. Civil Rights Era. They emphasized how *The Help* depicts “utter chaos and disorganized confusion” within “Jackson’s black community” in the wake of Evers’s murder, rather than illustrating “the courage demonstrated by black men and women who continued [Evers’s] fight” after his death.⁴ The ABWH further condemned the novel’s stereotypical “representations of black life,” particularly the “disappointing resurrection of Mammy” and the “irreverent” dialect of black characters.⁵

Like the ABWH, Tikenya Foster-Singletary’s 2012 article in *The Southern Quarterly* explores how the novel’s “representations of spoken language are coupled with descriptions of black bodies” in ways that characterize “blackness in unflattering, unfair ways”.⁶ Foster-Singletary’s work offers a productive reading of racial division between characters through racialized bodies represented in *The Help*, and she does so in a way that opens scholars up to broader investigations into the cultural implications of the novel. However, since her publication just one year after the movie’s premiere, the conversation seems to have died before it even began. The novel appears to have lost scholarly interest, largely due to the same representational problems that the ABWH and Foster-Singletary highlight.

Indeed, Stockett’s widespread, yet short-lived, popularity has thus-far failed to attain serious and sustained academic consideration presumably because its narrative structure – privileging the white heroine – largely marginalizes its African American characters. This white heroine, Skeeter Phalen, is a young, college-educated, aspiring writer who returns home to Jackson, Mississippi at the time of the Civil Rights Movement. As the lone “enlightened” white woman in the narrative, Skeeter decides to use her writing skills (and her white skin) to record and publish a book of stories from the lives of several African American housemaids. The narrative is written in first-person from three alternating perspectives: Skeeter’s own, and from Aibileen’s and Minny’s, the two leading African American housemaids in the novel. The life stories of Aibileen, Minny, and other housemaids function as subplots to the book-writing main plot, although the themes raised from their experiences – racial equality, anti-segregation, interracial coalition – form the political ethos of the novel.

Despite its political ethos, Stockett’s work remains largely a matter for discussion and not (yet) for scholarship. For example, *The Help* arose during discussion at the 2012 SAMLA Conference last November in the Society for the Study of Southern Literature (SSSL) panel. In this discussion, panelists and audience members fervently inventoried the novel’s flaws, which include: use of African American dialect in representations of the housemaids’ thoughts, a white woman’s exploitation of African American women’s

³ Ida E. Jones, Daina R. Berry, Tiffany M. Gill, Kali N. Gross, and Janice Sumler-Edmond, “An Open Statement to the Fans of *The Help*,” *Association of Black Women Historians*, Accessed April 30, 2012, http://www.abwh.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2%3Aopen-statement-the-help. The ABWH’s open statement regarding *The Help* is one of the most-read public critiques of *The Help*.

⁴ Jones et al., “An Open Statement”.

⁵ Jones et al., “An Open Statement”.

⁶ Tikenya Foster-Singletary, “Dirty South: *The Help* and the Problem of Black Bodies,” *The Southern Quarterly* 49.4 (Summer 2012): 95.

stories, the theme of the “white savior”, the diminished inclusion of the Civil Rights Movement, the lack of clear ethical criticism of Jim Crow laws, the reductive portrayal of the maids – particularly Aibileen – as a Mammy figure with undying love for her white babies, and the depiction of black men as drunken wife-beaters. By these critiques, *The Help* seems to have reincarnated the Antebellum “Scarlett and Mammy” duo as the Civil Rights Era “Skeeter and Aibileen”.

During the SSSL panel, an audience member expressed her disgust that the most brazen of the novel’s housemaids, Minny Jackson, is reduced to handling her own feces. The novel implies that Minny bakes her own excrement into a “chocolate” pie so that her racist arch-nemesis will “eat [her] shit”.⁷ The SSSL audience member acknowledged Stockett’s historical nod to slavery in the Antebellum South, as there are recorded accounts of domestic slaves poisoning their masters, but even so, she adamantly rejected the notion that handling one’s own shit was an empowering act of political assertion. Her point was well-made, and it brings into question the novel’s inclusion of an excrement-filled pastry within an already-problematic text about racial equality and interracial coalition.

Minnie’s “poop pie” is just one of numerous digestional metaphors throughout Stockett’s novel: Aibileen’s potty training prowess, Hilly’s toilet initiative for “the help” of Jackson, a naked attacker’s “pecker-pie”, Celia’s vomiting spectacle, and Mrs. Phelan’s stomach cancer, to name just a few. Stockett’s pervasive trope of consumption, digestion, and expulsion figuratively communicates the novel’s Civil Rights ethos.⁸ Characters bake, eat, vomit, excrete, refuse food, or violate one another by invading the digestive system. The prevalence of these digestional literary devices as racial ethos begs the question, what do issues of racial identity and social politics have to do with digestion? Or inversely, how do the body’s functionality and interiority inform to the novel’s identity politics?

In this essay, I demonstrate how the literary effect of digestional tropes in Stockett’s *The Help* constitutes her characters’ identities through an integrated process between physiology (the body’s functionality) and psychology (the mind’s interiority). My thesis proceeds from an engagement with Elizabeth Grosz’s *Volatile Bodies* (1994), in which a mutually-constitutive relationship between the body and mind is theorized in relation to gender formation. My reading of the digestional tropes also draws on Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection.⁹ Kristeva suggests that human abjection of bodily waste is an integral part of identity construction. In this light, the repulsive nature of bodily functions illustrated in *The Help* prove integral for ontological production of character identity and narrative ethos, constituting not only the individual but also interpersonal and social dynamics. Considering the novel’s ethos in Civil Rights ideology, I outline how these digestional tropes forge and define interracial relationships. Ultimately, engaging Michael Kreyling’s Moebius strip logic of memory-and-history in self-revision, this essay argues that *The Help* affords literary and cultural scholars with an access point to explore contemporary U.S. American identity as it is constructed through popular, albeit problematic, media.

⁷ Kathryn Stockett, *The Help* (New York: Berkley Books, 2009), 398.

⁸ Stockett, *The Help*, 362.

⁹ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1941).

L'Entrée: Grosz's Möbius Strip and Stockett's Digestional Trope

In the introduction to *Volatile Bodies*, Elizabeth Grosz positions her theory within the history of philosophical and feminist thought regarding the gendered body. Namely, she situates her theory in the wake of Cartesianism; “Descartes, in short, succeeded in linking the mind/body opposition to the foundations of knowledge itself, a link which places the mind in a position of hierarchal superiority over and above nature, including the nature of the body”.¹⁰ Grosz highlights the “mutually-exclusive” relationship between the mind and body in the Cartesian model, and she underscores how they are perceived to be in “opposition” to one another.¹¹ The mind serves as the antithesis to the body and vice versa. As a result, this division causes an inherent hierarchy in which the mind is considered dominant over the body. The feminist concern with this model lies in the social association of the masculine with the mind and the feminine with the body, thereby establishing a hierarchy where man dominates woman. Grosz also notes several other divisions that proceed from this logic, which will prove useful in context of *The Help*; the particular extenuations of the mind/body binary include “...outside and inside, self and other...psychology and physiology...” and “public [and]...private”.¹² In order to disrupt the mutual-exclusivity and hierarchy inherent in the binary relationship, Grosz re-theorizes a relationship between mind and body that subverts Cartesian logic.

Grosz conceives of the body as an active contributing element of the highly fluid, fragmented, expanding, contracting, and wildly unstable “thing” that we call subjectivity. She uses the image of a Möbius strip to illustrate this theory: the mind and body continually turn so that at the moment categories of “inside” or “outside” are identified, the distinction between the two are always already subverted. The Möbius strip always turns, never stops, never stabilizes, and never maintains static boundaries. The Möbius strip’s ceaseless turning forges identity through an “interlocking” of “sexual [...] racial, cultural, and class particularities” by means of “mutual constitution”.¹³ Together, each of these elements (and others) function with and through one another to collectively, simultaneously, and ceaselessly generate (and fragment) identity. Moreover, she emphasizes vis-à-vis Nietzsche how self-perception is bound up in social “ideological production,” situating boundary transgression – “between the inside and the outside, the private and the public, the self and the other...” – as integral to identity formation. Any individual identity is not only an unstable generation of the mind/body relationship but also a production of its engagement with the social “other”.¹⁴ The other generates the self and vice versa.

I argue that Grosz’s idea of an ever-shifting, unstable mind/body collaborative production manifests in *The Help* through digestional tropes. Repeatedly in the text, knowledge conveyance (mind) engages the physical act of excretion (body), and together they generate a character’s personal and social identity. Consider the physiological function of the digestive system. First, a body consumes something: it takes an object that is external and internalizes it through the digestive tract. This “thing” is either accepted by the stomach or rejected as vomit. If accepted, the thing is digested and passed through the body, producing excrement. What is outside the body

¹⁰ Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), 6.

¹¹ Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 21, 6.

¹² Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 3, 23.

¹³ Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 19-20.

¹⁴ Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 20.

moves inside, and what is inside moves outside. This process recalls Grosz's image of the Möbius strip, constantly turning inside-out and destabilizing the boundaries of the body.

Le Plat Principal: Shit, Abjection, and the Individual

Stockett's digestional tropes arise as early as the first paragraph of her novel. The central African American housemaid, Aibileen Clark, introduces herself by her profession: "Taking care a white babies, that's what I do...I know how to get them babies to...go in the toilet bowl before they mamas even get out a bed in the morning".¹⁵ Right away the identity politics of excrement are established. Aibileen identifies herself, not by what she is, but by what she "do[es]" and what she "get[s]" others to do. Her identity is constituted by physical action, necessitating the use of her own physiology to educe a specific physical action from another. This bodily identification is further enhanced by a specific form of psychical "know[ledge]" about how to teach children to use the potty as a repository for digestive waste. Her specification that these children are "white" serves as a racial demarcation. Aibileen's chastisement of their mothers' laziness ("before they mamas even get out a bed...") further signifies difference and codes her identity with such virtues as industry, wisdom, and ingenuity.¹⁶ That she does all of these things while the white mothers are still sleeping is narrated in a way that elevates her personal- and social-value. Aibileen's introduction through potty training establishes an embittered view of white mothers, hinting both at macro-level racial politics and micro-level interracial relationships. Aibileen identifies herself by means of this skill, yet the fact that she performs this act for hire in the domestic (private) sphere also produces her social (public) identity. Indeed, Aibileen's potty-training expertise produces a complex system of identity production, organized by excretion.

In *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva asserts the formative function of "loath[some] ...food...filth, waste, or dung"¹⁷ toward establishing self-identification:

These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands...on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself as being alive, from that border. Such wastes drop so that I might live [...].¹⁸

Kristeva reads the act of physical excretion as a metonym for the psychological need to assert selfhood through abjection of vile internalities. This model of producing identity through abjection frames Aibileen's own self-identification vis-à-vis excrement: her ability to train babies how to "drop" their own "waste" in the proper location "extracts" Aibileen's identity from the boundary between her and the lazy white mothers she contempts. This logic of identity formation – abjecting the other through the other's abject excrement – animates racial politics throughout the novel.

¹⁵ Stockett, *The Help*, 1.

¹⁶ The stereotypical and arguably-demeaning vernacular imbibed in this quote begs acknowledgement, as it represents one of the foremost offensive representational elements in the novel. I omit direct engagement with the vernacular because its political implications require a more extensive linguistic and racial methodology than my current theoretical framework provides.

¹⁷ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 2.

¹⁸ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 3.

In addition to Aibleen's potty training abilities, the novel's white antagonist, Hilly Holbrook, produces her own identity through toilet politics. In the first scene of the novel, Skeeter and her girlfriends are playing bridge, and when nature calls, Hilly refuses to use the front guest bathroom. Hilly's mother explains, "She's upset because the Nigra uses the inside bathroom and so do we".¹⁹ This revulsion against sharing a toilet with "the help" introduces the novel's take on racial conflict. As president of Jackson's Junior League, Hilly makes it her mission to see that every white home in Jackson has a separate toilet outside of the home for the housemaids. She calls this mission the "Home Help Sanitation Initiative".²⁰ Hilly writes the following advertisement for Skeeter to publish in the Junior League newsletter:

Hilly Holbrook introduces the Home Help Sanitation Initiative. A disease preventative measure...

Ladies, did you know that:

- 99% of all colored diseases are carried in the urine
- Whites can become permanently disabled by nearly all of these diseases because we lack immunities coloreds carry in their darker pigmentation
- Some germs carried by whites can also be harmful to coloreds too

Protect yourself. Protect your children. Protect your help.

*From the Holbrooks, we say, You're welcome!*²¹

Reading Hilly's Home Help Sanitation Initiative (HHSI) through Grosz's Möbius strip reveals how both psychical and physiological functions interact. Together, they produce her identity in such mutual-constitution that it is impossible to isolate where mental production ends and bodily production begins. That this initiative directly communicates Hilly's identity can be read in the spatial organization of the text: the HHSI itself falls within the boundaries of her name – "Hilly Holbrook introduces..." and "From the Holbrooks..." – indicating that the HHSI is integral to Hilly's identity in the novel. Given the novel's Civil Right ethos, promoting racial segregation of bathrooms makes Hilly the narrative antagonist on the wrong side of Jim Crow. Curiously, while the ideology of Jim Crow and racial segregation undoubtedly informs Hilly's initiative, overt reference to white supremacy ideals remains absent in the advertisement. Instead, she emphasizes the threat of "disease". Though clearly ideological, the HHSI is also deeply physiological to Hilly: her paranoia organizes around microscopic elements that transmit from the inside of one body to the outside through excretion, then from the outside of an "other's" body to the inside via the toilet seat. The paranoia engendered here centers on unstable bodily boundaries, and it generates both physiological and psychological revulsion of "colored diseases" that both produce and proliferate one another mutually. That Hilly's fear and subsequent identity emerge from false knowledge only underscores the instability of physiology as the sole, independent producer of identity, and though ideology is clearly at work here, the HHSI explicitly engages the body.²²

Indeed, Hilly's ideology of racial segregation plays a productive role in her initiative, and its endurance depends upon the ability to establish and fortify clear physical and mental boundaries that separate racialized bodies. As part of the HHSI,

¹⁹ Stockett, *The Help*, 9.

²⁰ Stockett, *The Help*, 186.

²¹ Stockett, *The Help*, 184.

²² While the reader clearly understands that "colored diseases" are fictitious, the novel does not clarify whether Hilly publishes this falsehood knowingly or not.

Hilly recommends, “*bathroom installation in your garage or shed*”, requiring African American housemaids to excrete outside the boundaries of the white home.²³ The physical expulsion of the African American body from the white bathroom demarcates a racial boundary of excretion: it implies *excretion from black bodies is not good enough for white folks’ toilets*. The HHSI precipitates a psychological denigration of the African American housemaids that was intrinsic to the resilience of Jim Crow under segregationist ideology. It simultaneously attempts to both convince housemaids of their own inferiority and assert Hilly’s (and all HHSI participants’) privileged identity as a white woman. In this light, Hilly *abjects* the black body in much the same way Kristeva describes psychological abjection of human waste, and Hilly’s racial abjection establishes a physical and psychological boundary denoting where certain racialized bodies may deposit their human waste.

As Kristeva notes, however, this boundary is far from essential: “If dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be...The border has *become* an object” (emphasis mine).²⁴ Categorizing the other as abject *inaugurates* the “border” as a thing in the first place. The boundaries that organize ideologically-formative binaries – spatial (inside/outside), individual (mind/body), and communal (self/other) – do not exist prior to political categorization of the boundary as such. Therefore, the use of “dung” as a trope in *The Help* exposes the surreptitious process of “the border becom[ing] an object”. It thereby renders binary logic an illusion that, in the context of the novel, subverts racial segregation through the dissolution of the white/black binary. It is this dissolution of Dualistic certainties, particularly racial binaries, that fuels Hilly’s paranoia. For, if racial binaries are an illusion, her fanatical abjection of Jackson’s “help” through excretion is the very thing that produces her privileged identity through difference from these exploited housemaids. In short, the HHSI constitutes both Hilly’s individual identity as the novel’s racist antagonist and the structural conflict of the narrative, organizing social dynamics among all characters in the text.

Although Hilly’s HHSI serves as the narrative impetus for the racial struggle in *The Help*, Stockett’s digestional trope is not limited to discussions of excrement. Grosz’s mutually-constitutive model of mind/body operates in instances of food consumption, as well. In fact, food is often linked to a character’s cognitive state. For example, when Skeeter finally decides to revolt against Hilly’s HHSI, her epiphany is illustrated in culinary language: “...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”.²⁵ Skeeter plainly categorizes her “insanity” as something experienced through the body, particularly through the mouth. Her cognitive experience is an edible fruit. She can consume it and taste its “sweet[ness]”. The conflation between emotion (mind) and taste (body) is emphasized in the phrase “bitter feeling”. Here, “bitter” harkens both the emotional and sensual definitions so that she experiences “bitter[ness]” in terms of psychology and physiology. A mutually-constitutive mind/body process inaugurates Skeeter’s emergence as the novel’s heroine. This intrinsic relationship is further reinforced by the image of a body “roll[ing] around in” the feeling. Again, her mental state is physically engaged, something she experiences on and through her body. Most

²³ Stockett, *The Help*, 184.

²⁴ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 3-4.

²⁵ Stockett, *The Help*, 407.

importantly, this narrative moment marks a significant turning point in Skeeter's self- and social-identification. This body/mind breakthrough constitutes her subjectivity; she finally becomes a rebel against Hilly's racial tyranny, thus defining herself in opposition to segregation. It seems the old adage "you are what you eat" rings true. Skeeter consumes the fruit of resistance and becomes a revolutionary.

Le Fromage: Poop Pie and Interpersonal Identity

We see, then, that characters' minds and bodies are operating together in the language of consumption/digestion/excretion to produce their *individual* identity. However, the characters exemplified above – Aibileen, Hilly, and Skeeter – do not constitute their individual identities in a vacuum. Rather, they engage others, as well: Aibileen through white babies and white mothers, Hilly through the help, and Skeeter through Hilly. This inner/outer exchange further harkens Grosz's assertion that this Möbius strip theory also subverts the self/other extension of the mind/body binary. This feature of Grosz's theory assimilates the profoundly social nature of identity politics. No identity emerges autonomously, and the image of the Möbius strip incorporates this principle because its boundaries are never stable. The inside self turns out, and the outside other turns in, simultaneously and ceaselessly: translated to the novel's trope of digestion, the exterior object is consumed, digested, and excreted – still destined for a shocking return to bodily interiority.

This brings me to the controversial climax of a novel about shit. Hilly Holbrook finally gets her just desserts, courtesy of the most brazen maid in the novel, Minny Jackson. We learn through the narrative that Minny once worked for Hilly's mother, and after Hilly sends her mother to a nursing home, she spreads rumors amongst the white women in town that Minny is a thief. Fortunately, Minny finds work with a social outcast who is the one woman excluded from these lies – a former "white trash" woman named Celia Foote. Before Minny goes to work for Celia, though, she is sure to repay Hilly for her cruelty. She mixes up a "chocolate custard pie" and takes it to Hilly's house. Thinking she has won, Hilly smugly eats "[t]wo big pieces".²⁶ It is not until Hilly asks what "makes it taste so good" that Minny "tell[s] her what else [she] put in the pie for her".²⁷ Minny implies that she baked her own feces into the pie so that Hilly would, as the colloquialism goes, "eat [her] shit".²⁸

Contrary to Hollywood's adaptation, Stockett's narrative leaves the reader uncertain whether or not the pie actually contains feces. Regardless, Hilly's mother confirms that, even if the excrement were not a physical reality, it makes its intended psychological impact. Mother tells Hilly, "I wouldn't go tattling on Minny either, or you'll be known all over town as the lady who ate *two* slices of Minny's shit".²⁹ The Möbius strip continues its turn. Minny consumes, digests, excretes, and feeds her excrement to Hilly (whether physiologically or psychologically). The process, while revolting, symbolizes identity constitution between these two women through the violation of bodily boundaries. Hilly figuratively forces her racist politics down everyone's throat, so Minny physically forces her own political resistance down Hilly's.

²⁶ Stockett, *The Help*, 399.

²⁷ Stockett, *The Help*, 399.

²⁸ Stockett, *The Help*, 398.

²⁹ Stockett, *The Help*, 398.

This reciprocal process generates both Minny's identity as the hero who conquers the evil tyrant and Hilly's as the reprehensible villain humbled. It is important to note here that the mind/body exchange with the other both produces the individual's identity *at the same time that it* constitutes the relationship between characters. If there was any question before, there is none now; Minny and Hilly are mortal enemies across a racial demarcation line, on either side of a pie that is full of shit.

Although there is only one instance in *The Help* when someone (allegedly) consumes another person's excrement, the literary trope of eating someone's corporeal "pie" occurs repeatedly throughout the text, recalling Kristeva's inclusion of "loath[some]...food" within her list of bodily abjections.³⁰ Perhaps the most demonstrative example of this continued trope occurs in a scene that did not make it into the movie. Again it involves Minny, but this time she is working with her new employer Celia Foote. Minny and Celia are working in Celia's kitchen when a naked man approaches the house "touching himself".³¹ Noticing the women, he breaks a window, trying to sexually violate them. As Minny narrates this story, she describes his genitalia as food; "He's holding it out like he's offering us a po'boy sandwich".³² Furthermore, when Minny leaves the house to fight off the man, he verbally offers her "a little pecker pie", affirming his intent to assault her sexually. Here again, an individual attempts to violate another by penetrating bodily boundaries, and the story employs digestional language to characterize the assault.³³

The man knocks Minny to the ground, but before he can violate her, Celia rushes to the rescue. She attacks the man with "a fire poker", beating him mercilessly.³⁴ Even after he falls face down, Celia swings repeatedly; Minny describes the "sounds like chicken bones cracking".³⁵ Instead of being forced to eat his "pecker pie" or "po'boy sandwich", Celia turns him into a figurative "chicken" dinner, physically "cracking" his "bones" in a way that recalls the sound of teeth chewing on a savory thigh. Following another culinary euphemism, she *eats him for lunch*, not the other way around, and this exchange produces Celia's unique identity in the novel.³⁶ She stands over the attacker's body covered in blood, and Minny observes, "I see the white-trash girl she was ten years ago. She was strong. She didn't take no shit from nobody".³⁷ Again, this physical experience in digestional language psychically envisions Celia's identity as "white-trash", and this typically shameful characterization refigures as "strong" and obstreperous. Perhaps Celia inhabits the margins of white society, and perhaps she does possess less social-political power than, say, Hilly Holbrook. Indeed, this scene figures Celia in relation to Hilly because, unlike Hilly, she refuses to eat anyone else's "shit". In the Möbius strip politics of this scene, the dynamics between Celia and Hilly are constituted at the same time Celia's identity materializes. More important to the racial politic of the novel, her friendship with Minny is forged. In fact, Minny is so

³⁰ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 2.

³¹ Stockett, *The Help*, 360.

³² Stockett, *The Help*, 360.

³³ Stockett, *The Help*, 362.

³⁴ Stockett, *The Help*, 363.

³⁵ Stockett, *The Help*, 364.

³⁶ As another white heroine emerges from the text, this scene falls into the same tired racial roles as Scarlett and Mammy, as Minny's narrative serves more to illustrate the virtue of Celia than to express her own personal agency. While the digestive trope seems to move toward destabilizing a black/white binary, the narrative structure falls short, undermining the figurative movement toward a Civil Rights ethos.

³⁷ Stockett, *The Help*, 365.

dumbfounded at the idea of a white woman saving her that she calls their interracial relationship “a brand-new invention”.³⁸

Le Dessert: The Pie that Fed Jackson, Mississippi

The theme of interracial coalition, friendship even, organizes the racial ethos of *The Help*. Characters collaborate to reconstitute social and political identification by subverting calcified boundaries between inside/outside, white/black, self/other, mind/body. Skeeter works with Aibileen, Minny, and ten other maids to record their stories of working for white women in segregated Jackson. Through the process, the housemaids divulge the terrible things that they have experienced, and Skeeter packages the stories for public consumption. One could read this process as Skeeter baking a pie and, like Minny, filling it with all of the “shit” the housemaids endure working for their white employers. Minny, herself, even bakes in the story of Hilly’s chocolate pie for “insurance,” knowing that Hilly would have a vested interest in denying that these stories are about Jackson in order to save face.³⁹ The writers’ hope is that, with the president of the Junior League denying the embarrassing stories, the housemaids will not suffer retaliation.

Ultimately, Skeeter publishes her book under the name “*Help*,” signifying that it tells stories about “the help” in order “to help” Civil Rights efforts in Jackson.⁴⁰ As book sales accelerate, the city’s white women begin to recognize the stories, and the Möbius strip process continues as identities emerge through mutual constitution between self and other. White women, typified by Hilly, attempt to force the HHSI upon black housemaids. One housemaid, Minny, digests this oppression, excretes her own form of resistance, and feeds it back to Hilly. Hilly’s retribution is regurgitated for the book “*Help*” and served to women across the nation, which prompts more and more women to acknowledge their relationships with each other. In one instance, a white woman named Lou Anne approaches Skeeter about the chapter that her housemaid Louvenia wrote. Far from angry, Lou Anne expresses her gratitude and admiration for Louvenia, and she promises to never fire her.⁴¹ Lou Anne further confesses that Louvenia is “the only reason [she] can get out of bed sometimes”.⁴² In this Möbius strip cycle, Louvenia produces her story; Lou Anne consumes it, and their deep-seated friendship is constructed within the narrative. They subvert boundaries delineated by racial politics and forge a coalition. This coalition is offered to Skeeter, and she consumes it. This crowning moment affirms Skeeter’s role as the novel’s heroine; “Wasn’t that the point of the book? For women to realize, *We are just two people. Not that much separates us. Not nearly as much as I’d thought*”.⁴³ Here, Skeeter realizes

³⁸ Stockett, *The Help*, 365.

³⁹ Stockett, *The Help*, 433.

⁴⁰ Stockett, *The Help*, 419.

⁴¹ As in the scene with Celia and Minny, Skeeter’s encounter with Lou Anne serves as a climatic reassurance that the heroine has done a noble thing in publishing the text; after all, Louvenia will never be without a job. However, Louvenia’s job security is a product of her selfless “Mammy-like” care for Lou Anne. An equitable return for the life that Louvenia has made possible for Lou Anne might be and equitable opportunity to make a living as something other than a white woman’s housemaid. Figuratively, the trope subverts racial binaries, yet the narrative structure undermines this ethos of racial equality.

⁴² Stockett, *The Help*, 491.

⁴³ Stockett, *The Help*, 492.

that she has accomplished the central “point” in publishing the novel’s internal book “*Help*” at the same time that the external text, *The Help*, states its ethos most plainly.

***Digestif*: Of “Shit” and Scholarship**

As demonstrated at the beginning of this article, *The Help* has fallen by the wayside as a potential object of scholarly investigation primarily due to its problematic racial representations, several of which I have annotated in my analyses above. It seems that the racial ethos asserted by Stockett’s figurative trope is subverted again and again by the novel’s narrative structure as it privileges a white heroine. The ideology (mind) of the story is subverted by its text (body), though it has still produced popular interpretation as “a landscape of hopeful change in America”.⁴⁴ But, is popular acclaim and scholarly identification of a (perhaps failed) figurative effort toward racial-equality enough to exonerate the text of its extensive representational sins against African American identity?

In 2011, these representational sins were brought before the Mississippi state courts when Ablene Cooper, an African American who worked as nanny and maid to Kathryn Stockett’s brother, filed a lawsuit against Stockett for using “her likeness” to create Aibileen Clark in *The Help*.⁴⁵ Although the lawsuit was dismissed under a “statute of limitations”, the evidence against Stockett is fairly compelling that she used details from Ablene’s life to publish *The Help*, much like Skeeter does with “*Help*”.⁴⁶ Stockett’s ethical offense has been well-documented in the U.S. media, so I will not belabor that point. Instead, I am concerned with Stockett’s process of revising reality to recreate an imagined fiction of Southern politics. Employing Ablene’s private experiences, she writes a fictional world designed to affect the public sphere. This creative production between private and public suggests one more consideration of the Möbius logic that advocates *The Help*’s potential as a “promising” cultural reservoir.⁴⁷

In *The South that Wasn’t There: Postsouthern Memory and History*, Michael Kreyling employs a Möbius logic similar to Grosz as he examines media produced about the U.S. South:

I argue that the relationship between history and memory is one of organic necessity; that southern “media” (novels, memoir, film, a collection of legal documents) spread before us as one of the most promising fields for extending the exploration of history-and-memory; that southern “media” deserve this study because the forms and structures of those media present us with a Moebius-like strip of collective, social self-narration, self-revision.⁴⁸

The history/memory pairing that Kreyling engages follows the same binary logic

⁴⁴ Adriana Trigiani, frontispiece to *The Help*, by Kathryn Stockett (New York: Berkley Books, 2009).

⁴⁵ Susan Donaldson James, “Black Maid Sues, Says ‘The Help’ Is Humiliating,” *ABC News*, last modified February 22, 2011. <http://abcnews.go.com/Health/lawsuit-black-maid-ablene-cooper-sues-author-kathryn/story?id=12968562>. James reports, “Besides their names, both maids have a gold tooth. Like the fictional Aibileen, she lost her son to cancer several months before the birth of the Stocketts’ first child”.

⁴⁶ Jen Chaney, “‘The Help’ lawsuit against Kathryn Stockett is dismissed,” *The Washington Post*, last modified August 16, 2011, http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/celebritylog/post/the-help-lawsuit-against-kathryn-stockett-dismissed/2011/08/16/gIQAiCWqJJ_blog.html.

⁴⁷ Michael Kreyling, *The South that Wasn’t There: Postsouthern Memory and History* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2010), 2.

⁴⁸ Kreyling, *The South that Wasn’t There*, 2.

discussed earlier in this article; it traditionally holds the dual elements as mutually-exclusive and hierarchal in nature. On one hand, History is typically privileged as the authorized, objective, and publically-accepted fact of the past. On the other hand, memory figures the unofficial, subjective, and privately-held property of an individual. Similar to Grosz, Kreyling conceives of the two as “organic” to one another as they mutually-constitute “collective, social self-narration, [and] self-revision.” He sees history-and-memory working together to construct a past in order to “self-revise” social identity in the *present*. This pertinence to contemporary social identity warrants investigation of all “southern media”, including canonical and popular media alike. Throughout his book, Kreyling reveals inaccurate and problematic representation of southern history in order to discover what these revisions of history can tell us about contemporary social politics. How do popular-yet-problematic representation of the U.S. South constitute southern and, indeed, U.S. American identity in the 21st Century?

Following Kreyling’s methodology, my earlier deliberation between condemnation and exoneration of *The Help*’s offensive representation of African American identity proves abortive. Instead, productive scholarship might ask: What sort of contemporary “collective, social self-narration” is produced among *The Help*’s audience through Stockett’s digestional trope of abjection and mutual mind/body identity constitution? In what ways does Stockett’s novel rewrite U.S. American memory of the Civil Rights Era as an embodied, female coalition occupying the private home space, thereby expatiating upon the authorized Civil Rights History largely characterized by male figures championing ideals in the public sphere? What does it say about U.S. popular culture that it applauds a white female author for “self-revise[ing]” her identity as the fictional Skeeter Phalen, white heroine in a Civil Right Era? How does Stockett’s self-revision signify U.S. American internalization of Civil Rights memory and white yearning to claim Civil Rights heritage as their own? And if this revision reeks of racial exploitation, how can we read this claim as suggesting “right” ownership of Civil Rights heritage and memory? Answering these questions demands a wide-range of methodological approaches that extend beyond the framework I can offer here. For now, I simply assert that in light of *The Help*’s role as cultural artifact of Civil Rights memory-and-history and considering its undeniable contribution to contemporary U.S. American imagination, it is too costly to dismiss Stockett’s work from scholarly investigation.

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Plăcinte și (po)politică în romanul *The Help*: salvarea corpului (literar) din desuetudinea politică

Eseul de față explorează efectul literar al tropilor digestivi din romanul *The Help* [Ajutorul] al lui Kathryn Stockett și felul în care aceștia semnifică și construiesc identitatea. În lumina convingerilor lui Stockett despre egalitatea rasială și despre coaliția interracială dintre femei, acest eseu investighează modalitățile în care tropii sus-mentaționați modelează și definesc relațiile interracială dintre personaje. Bazându-se pe psihanaliza feministă a lui Elizabeth Grosz din *Volatile Bodies* [Trupuri volatile] (1994), eseuul ia în considerație natura integrată și reciproc constitutivă a relației dintre minte/corp. De asemenea, mă voi folosi de teoria Juliei Kristeva despre abjecție, ce accentuează importanța „celuilalt” în raport cu ideea de deșeu ca trăsătură esențială a construcției identității, fie ea personală, interpersonală sau socială. În cele din urmă, angrenând în discuție logica lui Michael Kreyling de tip banda lui Möebius referitoare la memoria-și-istoria aflate într-un proces de redefinire proprie, eseuul susține că romanul *The Help* le oferă cercetătorilor din domeniile literar și cultural un punct de acces la identitatea contemporană americană din Statele Unite, așa cum e ea construită în mass-media care, deși populară, nu este mai puțin problematică.