"Thrown on Their Own Resources": Collaboration as Survival in Imitation of Life

Kristi Branham
Western Kentucky University, kristi.branham@wku.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/ws_pubs

Part of the American Film Studies Commons, American Literature Commons, American Popular Culture Commons, Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies Commons, and the Women's Studies Commons

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by TopSCHOLAR®. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of TopSCHOLAR®. For more information, please contact topscholar@wku.edu.
"THROWN ON THEIR OWN RESOURCES":
COLLABORATION AS SURVIVAL STRATEGY IN
IMITATION OF LIFE

There is no doubt *Imitation of Life* offers a compelling story for an American audience. Fannie Hurst's 1933 novel was immediately made into a film in 1934, and that version was remade in 1959. Hurst's novel was a bestseller and both film versions were box office hits. The repetition of the story over and across the first half of the twentieth century signals its resonance for American audiences, and its success is partly attributable to this resonance. The story contends with some of the enduring concerns of the early twentieth century—the "woman question" and the "race question." Yet, scholarly treatment of the story's various incarnations has been mostly unbalanced. Not only have scholars focused primarily on the subplot of the black daughter who can pass as white, they also have given more attention to Douglas Sirk's 1959 film version, a testament to Sirk's popularity among film scholars. Sirk's film has been the focus of a small cottage industry of scholarly work while there has been little attention given to John Stahl's 1934 film adaptation and the novel (aside from a few studies of Hurst's work and life) until its recent reissue by Duke University Press in 2004.

The "woman question" and the "race question" are conflated in the passing story in both the 1934 and 1959 film versions of *Imitation of Life*. By 1959, the subplot of the black woman's young daughter and her desire to pass as white has shifted to the main theme of the story. However, the emphasis on the passing story shifts focus to the daughter and away from the mothers who are in fact the main characters. While scholars do give attention to the black mother in their examination of the passing subplot, they do so only as a sort of cultural type. She is the overbearing "mammy" who loves too much and who imparts white patriarchal imperatives for race and gender. This fascination with the daughter and her perspective at the expense of the mother reflects the direction of much feminist literary and film scholarship in general.

And yet, the story of the white and black female protagonists and their efforts to financially support daughters and maintain a home without traditional male assistance reflects women's ambivalent relationship to the dominant cultural ideal of womanhood during the first half of the twentieth century, one that is not only gendered but also racially and economically determined. Marked by world war, economic depression, and institutionalized racism, the early decades of the twentieth
century offered little opportunity for women to work outside the home and severely restricted interracial relationships. I argue that *Imitation of Life* takes as its central theme women's efforts to balance home and work life by juxtaposing the cultural ideals of feminine self-sacrificing with masculine self-making. In each iteration of the story, these efforts at employment threaten the female protagonists' relationships with their daughters. The discourse surrounding *Imitation of Life* obscures the collaboration and expressions of care between the white and black mothers with the unfortunate effect of reinforcing dominant racial codes that restrict interracial relationships between women in order to maintain the "color line." My analysis focuses specifically on the novel and Stahl's adaptation in an effort to emphasize the story's origins at a time when economic exigencies forced a blurring of the gender and racial codes for public and private spheres. The novel's publication in 1933 and film adaptation the following year address the popular attitudes toward women working outside the home at a time in US history when the unemployment rate for men is above twenty percent.

Though the novel and film differ significantly in many of the details of the plot, the narratives' general premise is the same and follows the basic outline of Hurst's novel. The story revolves around the lives of four women—two mothers and their two young daughters (Bea Pullman and Delilah Johnson in the novel and Stahl's 1934 film played by Claudette Colbert and Louise Beavers). Ostensibly, the main character is the white mother, but critics are right to treat both the white and black mothers, if not also both daughters, as the protagonists of the story. Both of the main female characters are young widows with young daughters to support. Left without the financial contribution of their husbands, both women must extend their roles beyond that of wife and mother to become the primary breadwinners for their small families, a role traditionally reserved for men during the first half of the twentieth century and that gained force during the Great Depression.

Whereas the tensions between work and home rarely appear in a male character's rise to wealth and power, in the woman's film this tension is central. If we consider the narrative involving the protagonist female couple, Bea and Delilah, then we need to consider the main line of this narrative's development. Both women rise from poverty to wealth. This trajectory follows the cherished and enduring US rags-to-riches story. But this American rags-to-riches tale is most often one defined by masculine achievement. Those who rise from poverty to wealth gain that success and power in the public realm of government, business, or industry, spaces exclusively carved out for men. For women, the price of such success is measured against her perceived failures at home. Marina Heung refers to this type of film as "the 'rise-to-power' film" and defines it as one that offers "a discourse on the 'woman's sphere.'" Heung argues:
worldly success for women usually necessitates failure as wives and mothers. In the balance between domestic happiness and career success, then, the issue is usually decided in favor of the former, since each film typically ends by reinscribing women within the home and family. (22)

In the novel and film, the characters perform both paid public work and unpaid private work, but dominant class, race, and gender norms constrain women's opportunities for paid work and professional success. That their efforts are motivated by their motherly responsibilities in part excuses what would be considered their transgressions into the masculine world of paid work. To compensate for what would otherwise be transgressive, within the narrative there remains the suggestion of Bea's dissatisfaction with the time her professional demands take away from her daughter and home. Stahl's 1934 version of the film follows closely the narrative of Hurst's novel in which Bea builds a corporate empire using Delilah's pancake recipe for a chain of restaurants and a packaged pancake flour. In the novel, Bea's desire for career success is clearly motivated by her need to support her family. However, Stahl's adaptation barely hints at the motivation behind Bea's determined drive for professional success.

By way of contrast, let us first take a look at Hurst's Beatrice Chipley. The first fifteen chapters of Hurst's novel detail the political climate of the early twentieth-century United States alongside the reader's introduction to a seventeen-year-old Bea and several devastating personal tragedies—her mother's death, her father's stroke, her arranged marriage, her husband's tragic death, and the ether- and grief-soaked birth of her daughter. Within the span of two years, the teenage Bea becomes a widow with two infantile charges—her enfeebled and wheelchair-bound father and her infant daughter. The novel begins with the death of Bea's mother, and the opening chapter offers the young teenage girl's reflection on the mystery of her mother and a mother's sacrifices. Bea's thoughts turn to the physicality of her mother brought starkly into relief by the presence of her mother's corpse. Bea finds herself unable to imagine her mother's own corporeality: "the most physical thing she had ever connected with her mother was the fact of her having died" (1). Not only is Bea puzzled by her mother's physical presence especially in death, but she cannot imagine the requisite intimacies associated with that physicality. She is unable to imagine the physicality of life's requirements, her mother's machinations that propel daily living, a mother's work within the home. Most puzzling for Bea is the physical intimacies of conjugal obligations, of sex between her parents: "this mystifying riddle of the intimacies, that must, by very virtue of her own existence, have transpired between her father and mother" (3). Bea's inability to comprehend womanly presence and physicality informs her own development and foreshadows her future inability to connect with home, her culturally assigned space.

After her mother's death, the responsibilities of managing the small household, consisting of her father and the boarder Mr. Pullman, immediately fall to Bea. These are responsibilities for which the young teenager is unprepared. After her mother's death, the "product" of her mother's invisible labors becomes visible to Bea:
Management of even so modest a household ... was packed with a minutiae of detail, of which, during the lifetime of her mother, she had scarcely been conscious. Then, icepans had never overflowed, nor laundry accumulated, nor windows grown thick with grime. There had been tape hangers always on towels, and unfrayed cuffs on her father’s shirts, and new all-over-embroidery corset-covers in her dresser, without anyone seeming to give any apparent thought to them. They were just there, the product of Mother. (5)

As the teenage Bea assumes the woman’s responsibilities of the home, the revelation of this work overwhelms and astonishes her. “The product of Mother” the narrator describes is, as Adrienne Rich says, “the work that others constantly undo” and consistently take for granted (43). This is work that is never completed and rarely noticed. This “product,” though, consists of more than just the basic requirements of maintaining a home. Not only does “Mother” ensure that icepans get emptied, laundry gets done, and windows stay clean, but the extra touches that signal knowledge of and caring for the home’s inhabitants also occur—“unfrayed cuffs” for an exacting husband and “all-over-embroidery corset-covers” for a young daughter. Always just out of Bea’s understanding and ability, “the product of Mother” is the one form of production at which Bea wishes to excel.

It is not that Bea purposely veers from the ideal established in the late nineteenth century of a woman as loving wife and mother in the home. Instead, as the novel explains, as a child she dreams of marriage and motherhood: “Ever since she had played dolls, Bea had wanted ... to be married. To live in the security of one’s very own home. To be Mrs. To sit opposite a man with whom one had borne a child. To fuss over and rear and dress that child as Mother had fussed over her” (35). Even as Bea plays with her dolls (toys designed with her future mothering in mind), she equates marriage to “the security of one’s ... home” and an avenue to the joys of motherhood. Her marriage to Mr. Pullman is one of financial convenience for her husband and her father (one needs a wife, the other the income a son-in-law would bring). It is also a marriage of convenience for Bea: “Mr. Pullman ... was not quite the dream of all the suppressed silent years. But perhaps marriage was” (34). It is obvious that Bea does not marry for love but instead for the ideal of marriage. As the novel explains, for Bea, “Marriage freed you from the nervous concerns of girlhood, eased your sense of being an outsider to life ... Marriage established you” (35). The ideal of marriage insisted that the role of wife and mother provided security for women; it “established” women, signaling their acquiescence to gender norms that urged women to remain within the home and tasked them with maintaining domestic life. Until her mother’s death and her own marriage, Bea pictured marriage as the domestic bliss the ideal depicts without any knowledge of the actual work required to maintain domestic “bliss.”

To make matters worse for Bea, she must perform these duties while enduring the little tyrannies of her father, a fastidious man with exacting requirements and expectations. And it is here, on the men in Bea’s life, that Hurst turns her sharpest critical eye. In his introduction to the 2004 reprint of *Imitation of Life*, Daniel Itzkovitz writes, “the novel explores classic sentimental distinctions between public and private, men and women” (xvi). Hurst’s novel critiques the either-or gender
system that idealizes different expectations for women and men—that women were
to care for the home and men entered the public world of work, providing financial
security for the home’s inhabitants. The novel is set during the first decade of the
twentieth century, and as Bea wrestles with assuming the duties of a woman in the
house, both her father and their boarder Mr. Pullman (her future husband) seem to
revel in their public role as men. In the evenings, they discuss the popular debates of
the time, talking politics and business in the parlor or on the sidewalk. They expect
that she will seamlessly assume the responsibilities of the home and they balk when
this transition of responsibility from mother to daughter is not so seamless.

The blatant contrast between the private and public sphere alongside Hurst’s biting
descriptions offer a harsh indictment of the middle-class gender system that claims
men’s economic and physical protection provides women the security to reign in the
home. As the novel so pointedly asks, “What happened to girls thrown on their own
resources?” (15). When the ideal of separate spheres fails, as it so blatantly does in the
novel, what choices are left a young woman in a society that offers few alternatives
to the rigid system? Hurst’s critique begins with a condemnation of the turn-into-
the-twentieth-century response to the “uncertainty about American masculinity”
(Itzkovitz xvi), and her treatment of the male characters is hardly kind. For example,
that Mr. Pullman, before their marriage, plagiarizes his speech on Abraham Lincoln
for the Pleiades Club foreshadows his façade of “vigorous manhood” (39). Her
father’s dandyism combined with his effeminate then enfeebled trivial tyrannies
sketch him as selfish and insensitive. That he has a stroke within the first few pages
of the novel and basically is infantilized signals masculinity’s reliance on others for
its sense of privilege. Bea’s male support system continues to fail, and though she
may be in love with the ideal of marriage, she does not have strong feelings for her
husband. She views her conjugal obligations as a means to the desired and necessary
end—having a child and becoming a mother. During her pregnancy, her husband,
on his way to purchase life insurance, a safety net for her and their child (something
her father refused to do and that worried her mother), is killed in a tragic train crash.
Hurst’s treatment here is harsh: Bea’s husband’s body is so mangled by the accident
that the casket must remain closed.

With Mr. Pullman’s death, Bea finds herself “thrown on [her] own resources.”
However, whereas paid work for men is socially tied to their masculinity, that
a woman might have to pursue paid employment outside her home threatens
her femininity. There is always the implied threat of sexual compromise and the
implication that a “working girl” loses her femininity and could lose her purity.
That she would have to veer from the script of marriage and motherhood due to
the economic failures of the men in her life haunts Bea during the months after her
mother’s death. As she assumes her mother’s duties, she also becomes aware of the
household’s financial standing. Even with the added income of a boarder, Bea has to
budget and compromise. And with the threat of financial failure always imminent,
she wishes her “Mother had not opposed the kindergarten course” that might have
given her a marketable and fairly acceptable skill for employment. She reflects on the
possible means she could employ to bring in more money:
It was considered all right to work for "pin money," although Mother had thought it made a girl mannish... It was considered all right, so long as it was for pin money and not through necessity, for a girl to work at stenography or teaching or salesladying. (16)

Here, Bea's reflection, through the admonitions of her mother, establishes the opposition between home and public work predominant for women in the early 1930s. If it were for money not necessary to the household's survival, "pin money," just a little extra to buy the frilly but unnecessary items for women's amusement like sewing and embroidery needles, and if it were a traditionally feminine job, "stenography or teaching or salesladying," then paid work outside the home was socially acceptable. However, that this work might be of a necessity, coupled with its implication of male failure, meant that working women bore the brunt of public scrutiny for these failures. A working woman would lose her femininity and with it her sense of herself as a woman within society; "it made a girl mannish." However, after her father's incapacitation, her husband's death, and the birth of her daughter, Bea faces an economically dire situation. Her most immediate need is survival for herself and her two charges.

It is not uncommon for film adaptations of novels to leave out much of the backstory and context. The exigencies of a film require a more condensed telling. But the loss of this backstory, the complete deletion of Bea's invalid father, and the reduction of her husband to a small photograph lessens an audience's sympathetic response. Certainly the theme of survival is present in both the novel and the film, but the desperation that so clearly fuels Bea in the novel fades with Stahl's film adaptation. Stahl does attempt to imply that Bea's tireless efforts are primarily motivated by the very real need to survive. Indeed, one of the more overarching themes for the 1934 adaptation of *Imitation of Life* is survival. In Stahl's adaptation, both Bea and Delilah are constrained in their options for paid work due to their gender and race. Survival for these women incorporates a variety of needs and wants. First of all, the women have to provide shelter, food, and other primary needs for themselves and their daughters. But they also have to provide emotional support along with other forms of caring labor. The need for shelter is especially highlighted in Delilah's efforts to literally find a home for her daughter and herself. To satisfy this need for shelter, both mothers require financial support. Because of this requirement, both women are forced to work outside the home. Delilah finds employment as a live-in domestic, and the first restaurant Bea opens is actually, physically attached to her home—Bea, Delilah, and their daughters take up residence in the living quarters in the back of the restaurant.

The conflicting social and cultural attitudes toward women and work outside the home generated by the rise of the New Woman in the public sphere (young, employed, and independent) and the record-setting unemployment rate for men...
during the Great Depression work to constrain and limit Bea's and Delilah's options for paid work. At first, Bea takes over her husband's business of selling maple syrup to the proprietors on the Atlantic City Boardwalk. In the novel, Bea is able to accomplish this because her initials are the same as her husband's thus hiding the fact of her gender. After the arrival of Delilah and her pancake recipe, Bea takes advantage of the pancake/maple syrup combination to start a restaurant. In Stahl's film, like the novel, Bea Pullman is a highly talented entrepreneur. Bea markets Delilah's pancake recipe into a prosperous line of restaurants and packages the flour for mass consumption. Bea's business acumen is highlighted as she hosts a party celebrating her corporation's ten years of success. As the hostess for this celebration, she is surrounded by men from the corporate world.

Significantly, then, this work outside the home is working inside the home. Her restaurant and pancake flour, as Stephen Handzo notes, are "commercial adaptations of women's domestic role" (par. 11). In other words, Bea makes her private kitchen public, blending her home, family, and business. The driving force behind Bea's success is her desire to make a perfect home. However, just as her home remains segregated though connected to her work, it is this desire that she cannot seem to translate into actual home life. The irony of Hurst's novel is that Bea succeeds in the public realm doing exactly what she cannot seem to do in the private realm—make a home and all for which that stands. Instead, it is this desire for the comforts of home that Bea infuses into her B. Pullman restaurants:

the something she yearned to create was akin to the kennel warmth and brightness she so passionately wanted to pour around herself and little family ... Here was opportunity or the equivalent of what life had started out to be with Mr. Pullman. (127)

The secret to the success of the B. Pullmans is just that—Bea's ability to bring to the hungry public what cultural ideals have assigned to women—to "soften a moment, warm a chilled hour" (127).

There is no doubt the relationship between the white and black mothers is one of employer and employee. In each version, the black mother negotiates an exchange
of labor for room and board for her and her daughter. In the novel, Bea purposely looks to hire a maid. Bea recognizes she can no longer leave her enfeebled father and infant daughter home alone while she drums maple syrup. The narrative states, “the much-mooted problem of a servant became no longer controversial.” Bea must make “A visit across the railroad tracks to the shanty district” to find someone “for a position at general housework, ‘sleeping in’” (75). Bea’s trip “across the railroad tracks” signals the loaded social codes for race, class, and gender. The work she is looking to hire out is considered menial work. This type of labor—caring for a small child and an invalid elderly man—is acceptable for a wife and mother to perform in her own home for her own family members, but to perform the same labor in another’s home for wages, unless she is black or poor, is compromising work. That a white woman might charge for services she should otherwise provide for free within her own home smacks too closely of sexual prostitution. It is acceptable, even expected, that a woman of color or poverty would sell these services, as her purity in dominant white society is not at issue.

Because of their marital status, the implied failures of their deceased husbands, and a system that offers few alternatives, Bea’s and Delilah’s situations are economically dire. In an effort to support themselves and their young daughters, they form a partnership for their daughters and for their mutual survival. Yes, this partnership is unequal. Bea, after all, is Delilah’s employer. Most simply, then, this is a story of a white employer and her black maid. However, just as their opportunities for employment are constrained by cultural conventions for women, so the contours of their personal relationship are constrained by what Adrienne Johnson Gosselin refers to as “the policies of racial etiquette,” “a complex network of behaviors designed to control close personal relationships” between whites and blacks (49). Because of the racial difference, this relationship is even more constrained between women who were constantly thrown together but needed to be kept separated to continue to serve the patriarchal structures. Unlike the novel, in the film version these women do not enter openly into this employer/employee relationship. Instead, they negotiate a division of labor within the household based on their particular strengths and determined by racial hierarchy. Whereas the financial support required to raise and to care for a child falls to Bea, Delilah enters the household and assumes the duties of home and of domestic management.

In Stahl’s adaptation, the opening scenes highlight the difficulties Bea experiences trying to juggle both public and private responsibilities. Bea is first seen bathing her toddler daughter in the upstairs bathroom and dressing her for “day school,” a prospect with which young Jessie is not pleased. Bea is also trying to manage the business of selling maple syrup. While bathing and dressing her daughter and preparing breakfast, she takes business calls on the phone in the downstairs hallway. We see her trying to negotiate unsuccessfully the various spaces of her home. When Bea takes a business call in the hallway, she is confined to that space by the limitations of the length of the phone cord. This phone call literally keeps her from the kitchen and from the bathroom where her daughter awaits. The message is clear. Business, activity in the public sphere, restricts a woman’s efforts in the home, the private sphere.

It is into this chaos that Delilah enters in answer to an ad for “cook, laundress, housemaid, colored, not afraid of hard work.” Since Bea did not place the ad (Delilah mistakes the address), Delilah’s appearance at Bea’s door is accidental but timely.
Delilah brings order to the chaotic scene with which the film opens. While Bea and Delilah stand in the kitchen trying to determine the mix-up over the ad, Jessie falls into the tub and begins to cry. Bea quickly excuses herself and races upstairs to check on her daughter. As Bea comforts Jessie, Delilah observes this domestic scene from the hallway. She is shown in a medium shot looking up through the stairs’ banister. The symbolism is powerful here. Clearly fenced in by the bars of the banister, Delilah faces very restricted opportunities. As she observes from below the communion of white mother and daughter, her facial expression softens. She immediately assumes the primary duties of domestic management. Bea returns to the kitchen to discover that Delilah has rescued from ruin the neglected breakfast, prepared the table, and possibly made a meal more delicious than what Bea might have done. From this point on, Delilah serves as domestic servant for Bea and performs most of the care work that occurs within the home. She is the “cook, laundress, housemaid,” along with unpaid nurse for Bea and their two children, Jessie and Peola.

Scholars make much of the film’s first scenes and the positioning of the two women in relation to one another. Valerie Smith argues that while the initial scenes of Stahl’s film show Bea in chaos, they also show her mobility, a signal of her future public success and achievements. By way of contrast, Smith explains that “the static quality of Delilah’s initial appearance” freezes her in a pastoral pose that harkens back to the plantation South. Delilah is trapped and constrained immediately in the film by the legacy of slavery. As Smith notes, Delilah “is the apologist’s vision of the plantation mammy revisited, devoid of any desire other than to care for white mistress” (45). Susan Courtney offers a similar reading, suggesting that the camera work in these first scenes offers “Delilah... as that which settles Bea’s chaotic struggles about the house” (par. 19). However, the 1934 film does not position Delilah as the dupe critics seem to want to make her. She does manage to secure employment and a home for herself and her child. Indeed, she secures a job that did not even exist. Delilah does respond to an advertisement, but she responds to the wrong address. Bea had not advertised for “a girl.” Despite this mistake, Delilah convinces Bea to employ her when there is no employment to be had. This is the first of two important negotiation scenes that put into motion the primary narratives of the 1934 film.

By way of contrast, the second negotiation scene depicts Bea wrangling a lease, renovations, and equipment for her first restaurant. This scene highlights Bea’s business acumen and contrasts it to her inability to manage alone her young daughter and home. She manages to secure all the necessities to open the restaurant despite the fact that she has only nineteen dollars in the bank. As Bea explains in a later scene, “all I had was talk.” Obviously, Bea is quite talented, but her business savvy is no match for Delilah, who, only a few scenes earlier, managed to negotiate room and board for
her and her daughter where none had existed. In both negotiation scenes, Delilah and Bea persuade others using the tools socially and culturally allotted them as a white and a black woman. Delilah negotiates employment in Bea's home by emphasizing what she and Bea have in common—they are mothers. Bea uses her eroticization as a "working woman" to persuade the men of business to accept the contracts on her terms.

Together these women form a very nontraditional traditional family. As Lauren Berlant suggests, Bea and Delilah compose "a quasi-companionate couple" (114). The female protagonists bring their individual talents to the partnership and their division of labor within the family mirrors traditional gendered and racial expectations. In the absence of sexual difference, racial difference determines the hierarchy. Bea assumes the traditional stereotypical male roles. She supports the family financially as well as provides the discipline required to raise children. Bea builds a pancake empire on Delilah's image and recipe to financially support their household, which includes Jessie, Peola, and Delilah. Bea attempts to police the household conflicts, for instance, between the black mother and her child, and between the two daughters. The white mother assumes the traditional role of the father within this nontraditional family, whereas the black woman functions as the traditional mother. Delilah performs the domestic duties of the house as well as the nurturing of the daughters and of Bea. Importantly, the black woman's nurturing within the home frees Bea from her maternal duties so that she can pursue career success. For both women, their relationship supersedes any formal employer/employee relationship.

It is the personal alliance and the intimacy, the emotional investment each woman has in the relationship, that plays the most significant part. In Stahl's film, that the personal relationship trumps the business relationship between the women is best represented in the scene where Bea incorporates the business and attempts to give Delilah twenty percent of the corporation. Here, Bea and her business manager, Elmer, sit at a small table. Delilah stands over them. Already, visually, Delilah is positioned over Bea, signaling the complexity of their relationship. As Bea explains the rewards of Delilah's newfound financial success—she can now afford a home, a car—Delilah protests that she does not want those things. For Delilah what is important is the other relationship between the women—their friendship and their home life. This relationship overshadows the business partnership so much that Delilah does not understand Bea's efforts to include Delilah in the incorporation. Instead, she interprets this as an attempt to send her away. To this, she asks Bea, "how am I gonna take care of you?" Bea is emotionally moved by this response, claiming that Delilah is going to make her cry. The scene is filmed so that all three characters are represented evenly in the frame; however, Delilah's form hovers over the film's representatives of business—Elmer and Bea. Brought back to
the core of their relationship, Bea promises then, to put the money away for Delilah, much like the contemporary expectations for male heads of households although it is the failure of these ideals that has brought Bea and Delilah together.

Of course, this scene is rife with racial stereotypes. There is no doubt that Delilah is a typical, even exaggerated, stereotype of the black mammy. This image relies on cultural types that have their origins in the American institution of slavery. Delilah represents the culmination of this stereotype for early twentieth-century America. As Jeremy G. Butler explains, "Delilah fits comfortably into the 'mammy' type: large framed, self-effacing, religious to the point of superstition, uneducated but 'wise' in matters of the heart, and above all else totally committed to nurturing not just her own daughter but Bea's daughter and Bea herself" (292). Importantly, it is this stereotype of the black mammy that Bea successfully commodifies and markets for her business, Aunt Delilah's Pancakes. By using both Delilah's recipe and her likeness, Bea literally packages and sells Delilah as a reflection of one of the dominant stereotypes surrounding African-American women in the United States. The mammy, the physical embodiment of a cultural fantasy of nurturance, becomes a product for sale and consumption. The success of Bea's corporation including her restaurants and pancake flour is in large part due to the force of this stereotype in early twentieth-century American consumer culture.

Like the film, the novel immediately establishes Delilah as the stereotypical black mammy, and Hurst's use of dialect for Delilah's voice only reiterates this type. Indeed, the character Hurst draws is so stereotypical, she could stand as the type from which the stereotype comes. When Bea first solicits Delilah's services, the narrative at once associates Delilah with the plantation South. Delilah explains to Bea that she is from Virginia and offers as an employment reference "Mrs. Osper Glasgow, wife of Cunnel Glasgow" of Richmond, Virginia (76). As the women negotiate the terms of their business relationship, the description of Delilah continues to emphasize her stereotypical mammy characteristics. For example, Bea purposely approaches Delilah on the street to ask if she knows anyone "who wants a position for general housework, sleeping in" (76). The narrative describes Delilah here as an "enormously buxom figure of a woman with a round black moon face that shone above an Alps of bosom ... scrubbed, starchy ..." (76). The emphasis on Delilah's "Alps of bosom," so much so that it is mentioned twice in her description, not only signals her physical size but also symbolizes her ample capacity for nurturing. That Delilah is also "scrubbed, starchy" attracts Bea to her and forecasts her skills at domestic work—here, specifically, as the "general housework" of cleaning and laundering. In response to Bea's initial surprise at Delilah's need to bring her child with her, Delilah counters with "Honey chile, I'll work for anything you is willin' to pay, and not take more'n mah share of your time for my young un, ef I kin get her and me a good roof over our heads" (76). In this statement, Delilah makes it clear that her immediate concern is not money but room and board for her and her child. It also indicates further Delilah's position as
the prototypical black mammy. Responding to what she assumes are Bea’s fears about hiring live-in help with a child, Delilah swears the needs of her child would never supercede the needs of Bea or her daughter, reinforcing the misconception that good mammies preferred their white charges to their own children.

In this capacity as a representation of the mammy type, Delilah does the work we do not necessarily see in the film except for brief glimpses of her cooking and caring for the family. Importantly, though, the implied existence and results of Delilah’s labor alleviate the necessity for Bea to perform this kind of work. And, this kind of employment includes the repetitious, monotonous, and never-ending work of cleaning, cooking, and laundering. Indeed, because of Delilah’s presence in the home, Bea is free to indulge in the more idealized work of mothering. However, her career keeps her from performing even this kind of mothering work for her daughter. Again, the capable Delilah picks up the slack in this area as well. Not only does she do the dirty hidden work of mothering, she also performs the nurturing care work that according to the cultural ideal signals more powerfully a mother’s love. Moreover, she also provides these types of wifely duties for Bea. For instance, in the 1934 film, there are at least two scenes where Delilah massages Bea’s feet after Bea has returned home from long days drumming maple syrup to the Boardwalk proprietors. These are representations of Delilah performing expected and typical wifely duties; she provides physical comfort for the woman of the house. However, these scenes, especially where Delilah administers to Bea’s weary body, are painful and uncomfortable as they highlight Delilah’s subservient status in Bea’s household but also the degraded status of care in dominant culture and the valorization of self-interest over self-denial.

Delilah’s character is a very painful reminder of the racism that infects our society. Indeed, Smith argues that Delilah as the mammy type is a representation of a continuing white fantasy for black nurturance. Immediately following Bea’s efforts to incorporate, the film shows the production line for Aunt Delilah’s pancake flour followed by the giant neon sign of Delilah’s image. Smith notes:

the symbolic power of this image is underscored by the ensuing shots in which we see how fully the type has captivated the popular imagination. The repeated image of the face on the box not only signals the passage of time and marks metaphorically Bea’s accomplishments. The proliferation of image shows as well the vast marketability of the mammy as type. (45)
In other words, the success of this image as a marketing tool relies on its cultural caché. As the 1934 film progresses, each repetitive image of the “Aunt Delilah’s Pancakes” sign illustrates Bea’s success and further commodifies Delilah as the perfect symbol of mothering work—by the end of the film Delilah is only a sign.

That Delilah functions here as the type of the black mammy is further reinforced by Delilah’s own claiming of that term. For instance, in Stahl’s film, Peola leaves the southern black college (which Bea is financing) and is working as a cashier in a restaurant. She returns home after Bea and Delilah find her working there. In this poignant and intimate scene between mother and daughter, Peola denies her relationship to Delilah. Peola asks Delilah to do the same, to deny her and to disown her so she can pass as white. Delilah responds tearfully and forcefully with “I’m your mammy; I ain’t no white mother.” This statement is significant for what Delilah is claiming and not claiming. The implication here is that a “white mother” could deny her child while a “mammy” could not. With the first part of Delilah’s statement, she appears to embrace the cultural stereotypes connected to the term “mammy.” However, she immediately follows this statement with her claim that she is not a “white mother.” Delilah’s claim first reverses the slave history of “mammies” that insists African-American women deny their own children in order to raise, nurture, and love white children and that justified forcing a mother away from her children with the myth that mammies loved white children more than their own. Delilah’s second statement—“I ain’t no white mother”—rejects white imperatives of mothering, not only for white women but also the imperatives white culture has established for black mothers.

In other words, Delilah emotionally and unabashedly claims her own definition of mothering. That she describes herself using a term placed on her by white culture does not necessarily mean that she defines that term similarly. Instead, Delilah has reclaimed and redefined the term “mammy” to represent something indefinable within the dominant white culture. Berlant claims:

Delilah utters the film’s most political sentences. ... Delilah talks back to the nation from within her fictive frame, in the mammy’s costume. No tales of the sunny south from her, or sweet memories of the plantation: when she steps out of her flour barrel she speaks of the political brutality of the national public sphere. (125)

Here, Berlant offers a reading of Delilah that contradicts the analysis of her as what Smith calls “the apologist’s vision of the plantation mammy revisited.” Instead of directing attention to Delilah’s appearance, responsibilities, and relationship with
Collaboration as Survival Strategy in *Imitation of Life*

the white characters, Berlant directs our attention to Delilah's speech and her address to the viewing audience. As Berlant rightly notes, in Stahl's 1934 film, "Delilah talks back ... from within her fictive frame" to question and challenge racism.

In many ways, the mammy stereotype serves as foil for the "White Mother" in US culture. The image of a strong black woman as work horse allows white women softness, sexuality, and femininity. However, I contend that in *Imitation of Life*, the mammy image offers one example of what a dominant patriarchal culture demands of all women: they should be unselfish in their care for their children and charges. That there are such extremes only testifies to the ambivalence our culture feels toward unequal divisions based on gender, race, or class. Although the characters in Hurst's novel and Stahl's adaptation are constrained by early twentieth-century racial and gender mandates, they are able to manipulate these mandates for their mutual benefit, yet in the absence of gender difference, racial imperatives determine public and private roles. Ultimately, Bea and Delilah's collaboration results in their public sanction. Delilah dies from a broken heart after her daughter rejects her supposed acceptance of racial codes, and Bea must abandon her love interest in order to maintain her business and keep her daughter. That they were able to develop and nurture a relationship between them that resulted in their public success and figured outside of social and cultural expectations for women could only be tolerated for a short time. The enduring nature of Hurst's original story signals the enduring nature of the "woman question" and the "race question" well into the twentieth century.

Kristi Branham
Western Kentucky University

Notes

1 John Stahl's 1934 film earned three Oscar nominations including a nomination for Best Picture. Douglas Sirk's 1959 film earned Susan Kohner (Sarah Jane) and Juanita Moore (Annie) Oscar and Golden Globe nominations for best supporting actor. Sirk was nominated for a Directors Guild of America award, and the film won a Golden Laurel award for top drama.

2 See, for example, Lauren Berlant, "National Brands/National Bodies: *Imitation of Life*"; Marianne Conroy, "'No Sin in Lookin' Prosperous': Gender, Race, and the Class Formations of Middlebrow Taste in Douglas Sirk's *Imitation of Life*"; Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, "Imitation(s) of Life: The Black Woman's Double Determination as Troubling 'Other'"; and Marina Heung, "What's the Matter with Sarah Jane?: Daughters and Mothers in Douglas Sirk's *Imitation of Life.*"

3 Lucy Fischer explains in *Cinematernity* that "only recently has serious attention been paid to motherhood. . . . Only later did feminist criticism valorize issues of" maternity (10). In her analysis of the 1937 film *Stella Dallas*, E. Ann Kaplan asserts that feminist analysis of the "mother" has mostly been constructed from the daughter position. She writes, "feminism was in part a reaction against our mothers, who had tried to inculcate the patriarchal 'feminine' in us" ("The Case of the Missing Mother." 126).

4 The years 1933 and 1934 mark the nadir of the Great Depression in the US, fueling negative attitudes toward women (especially married women) working outside the home. For a more detailed discussion of these attitudes see, for example, Betsy Israel's *Bachelor Girl: The Secret History of Single Women in the*
Collaboration as Survival Strategy in *Imitation of Life* 

Twentieth Century. For a historical overview of the Great Depression in the US, see, for example, T. H. Watkins's, *The Great Depression: America in the 1930s*; and Robert S. McElvain's *The Great Depression: America 1929-1941.*

5 The woman's film is characterized most simply by its inclusion of women protagonists for a female audience and is fixed historically in the first half of the twentieth century. This genre of film primarily deals with interiors for its physical settings and for its sources of conflict. Films in this genre can be read as simultaneously celebratory and critical in their approach toward women, women's work, and the predominant cultural ideal of womanhood.


7 Many other scholars have made arguments similar to Smith's. See, for example, Jeremy Butler's "Imitation of Life (1934 and 1959): Style and the Domestic Melodrama"; and bell hooks's *Reel to Real: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies.*

Works Cited


Flitterman-Lewis, Sandy. "*Imitation(s) of Life:* The Black Woman's Double Determination as Troubling 'Other.'" Fischer, *Imitation* 325-38.


Collaboration as Survival Strategy in *Imitation of Life*/273


