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6.

## National Brands/National Body: *Imitation of Life*

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Advertising ministers to the spiritual side of trade. It is a great power that has been entrusted to your keeping which charges you with the high responsibility of inspiring and ennobling the commercial world. It is all part of the greater work of the regeneration and redemption of mankind.

Every normal female yearns to be a luminous person.

Calvin Coolidge, 1929

Fannie Hurst, *Today is Ladies' Day*

In Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929), two light-skinned American women of African descent bring each other to mutual crisis. The gaze of one woman virtually embodies the other, calling her back from her absence-to-her-body, an absence politically inscribed by the legal necessity to be non-black while drinking iced tea at the Drayton Hotel in Chicago in 1927. Lost in thought about domestic matters, abstracted from her juridico-racial identity, Irene Redfield senses the gaze of the alluring blond "ivory"-skinned woman who watches her: "Feeling her colour heighten under the continued inspection, she slid her eyes down. What, she wondered, could be the reason for such persistent attention? Had she . . . put her hat on backwards? . . . Perhaps there was a streak of powder somewhere on her face. She made a quick pass over it with her handkerchief. Something wrong with her dress?"<sup>3</sup>

Something must be wrong with her, she suddenly has a body. She associates this sensation with the colonizing gaze whites wield when trying to detect whether a light-skinned person is white (a white icon) or black (a white hieroglyph): "White people . . . usually asserted that they were able

to tell; and by the most ridiculous means, finger-nails, palms of hands, shapes of ears, teeth. . . .<sup>4</sup> Yet Irene has already similarly catalogued and policed the body of her nemesis, disapproving her explicitly sexual display, her "peculiar caressing smile," "those dark, almost black eyes and that wide mouth like a scarlet flower against the ivory of her skin . . . a shade too provocative."<sup>5</sup> It turns out that the women, Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry, are childhood friends. But they share more than this, in mutually usurping the privilege white Americans have, to assume free passage within any public space they can afford to lease or own—like a taxicab, a table in a restaurant, rooms in a hotel, a private home.

The whiteness of blackness here requires the light-skinned African-American woman to produce some way to ameliorate the violation, the pain, and the ongoing crisis of living fully within two juridically defined, racially polarized bodies—and perhaps, if Hortense Spillers is right that American genders are always racially inflected, two genders as well.<sup>6</sup> Passing for non-black allows these women to wear their gender according to a particular class style. Irene affects the bourgeois norm of good taste, which means submitting her body to a regime of discipline and concealment; Clare wears the exotic sexuality of the privileged woman as her style of publicity. One style of femininity tends toward the invisible or the "abstract," which involves a wish to cast off the visible body, and the other, toward the erotic, the sensational, which hyper-emphasizes the visual frame.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, each of these styles of femininity aims to deflect the racializing scrutiny of white culture, as it abstracts the woman's public identity from the complex juridical, historical, and memorial facts of her "racialized" body. Thus each woman returns the other to her legally "other" body by seeing her, and seeing through her—not to another "real" body, but to other times and spaces where the "other" identity might be inhabited safely. To Clare, who passes racially in her marital, familial, and everyday life relations, it is a relief to leave the specular erotics of the white female body under the gaze of a similarly racialized friend. But for Irene the embodiment resulting from their encounter thwarts her desire—which is not to pass as a white person, but to move unconsciously and unobstructed through the public sphere (which is, in this case, a marketplace where people participate through consumption).

Deborah McDowell has recently argued that these two women desire each other, sexually. *Passing*, in her view, is a classically closeted narrative, half-concealing the erotics between Clare and Irene.<sup>8</sup> But there may be a difference between wanting someone sexually and wanting someone's body: and I wonder whether Irene's xenophilia isn't indeed a desire to occupy, to experience the privileges of Clare's body, not to love or make love to her, but rather to wear her way of wearing her body, like a prosthesis, or a fetish.<sup>9</sup> What Irene wants is relief from the body she has: her intense class

identification with the discipline of the bourgeois body is only one tactic for producing the corporeal "fog" in which she walks. "It was, she cried silently, enough to suffer as a woman, an individual, on one's own account, without having to suffer for the race as well."<sup>10</sup> This ideal model of bodily abstraction is understood, by Irene, to be nationally endorsed: despite suffering as a twice-biologized and delegitimated public subject—a "woman," a "Negro"—she displaces her surplus body onto the metaphorical logics of American citizenship, which become the "truth" of her body, her "person." Even though Irene desperately wants to save her rocky marriage, she refuses to emigrate to Brazil with her husband, where national alienation would replace racial: "She belonged in this land of rising towers. She was an American. She grew from this soil, and she would not be uprooted."<sup>11</sup> Married to this constellation of pain, her body the register for brands of race and of gender that specifically refer to the American context from which she has, apparently, parentless sprung, Irene's embrace of the nation seems a pathetic misrecognition. But what kind of body does American national identity give her, and how does the idea of this body solve or salvage the pain that the colonized body experiences? And if a desire to be fundamentally American marks one field of fantasy for Irene, how does this intersect her other desire, to be incorporated in another woman's body?

In Irene's case, as often happens in bourgeois-identified "women's literature," this moment of political consciousness takes place in desperation,<sup>12</sup> and rather than think systemically about the state she is in, she reverts to the tendency to faint and fade out that has served her so well, and so analogically, in the course of her life. But political theory has investigated more extensively the complex relation between local erotics and national identity, between homosociality and political abstraction.<sup>13</sup> So far almost all of this work, for clear historical reasons, has circulated around the construction of the male citizen in the political public sphere. Feminist political theorists, for instance, are reconsidering Enlightenment constitutionality, and how specifically white male privilege has been veiled by the rhetoric of the bodiless citizen, the generic "person" whose political identity is a priori precisely because it is, in theory, non-corporeal. Before moving to *Imitation of Life*, where a narrative of profound female identification is interarticulated with the national public sphere, it is worth spelling out specifically how such a model of political affiliation has figured the American male body, setting up a peculiar dialectic between embodiment and abstraction in the post-Enlightenment body politic.

The Constitution's framers constructed the "person" as the unit of political membership in the American nation; in so doing, they did not simply set up the public standard of abstract legitimization on behalf of an implicit standard of white male embodiment—technically, in the beginning, property ownership was as much a factor in citizenship as any corporeal schema.

Nonetheless, we can see a real attraction of abstract citizenship in the way the citizen conventionally acquires a new body by participation in the political public sphere. The American subject is privileged to suppress the fact of his historical situation in the abstract "person": but then, in return, the nation provides a kind of prophylaxis for the person, as it promises to protect his privileges and his local body in return for loyalty to the state. As Pateman, Landes, MacKinnon, and others have argued, the implicit whiteness and maleness of the original American citizen is thus itself protected by national identity<sup>14</sup>: this is a paradox, because if in practice the liberal political public sphere protects and privileges the "person's" racial and gendered embodiment, one effect of these privileges is to appear to be disembodied or abstract while retaining cultural authority. It is under these conditions that what might be an erotics of political fellowship passes for a meritocracy or an order defined by objective mutual interests.<sup>15</sup> The white, male body is the relay to legitimization, but even more than that, the power to suppress that body, to cover its tracks and its traces, is the sign of real authority, according to constitutional fashion.

Needless to say, American women and African-Americans have never had the privilege to suppress the body: and thus the "subject-who-wants-to-pass" is the fiercest of juridical self-parodies as yet authored by the American system. While this system prides itself liberally on the universal justice it distributes to its disembodied or "artificial" citizen, the mulatta figure is the most abstract and artificial of embodied citizens. She gives the lie to the dominant code of juridical representation by repressing the "evidence" the law would seek—a parent, usually a mother—to determine whether the light-skinned body claimed a fraudulent relation to the privileges of whiteness. By occupying the gap between official codes of racial naming and scopie norms of bodily framing conventional to the law and to general cultural practices, the American mulatta's textual and juridical representation after 1865 always designates her as a national subject, the paradigm problem citizen—but not only because she is indeterminate, and therefore an asterisk in the ledger of racial and gendered binarism that seems to organize American culture, as some critics have argued.<sup>16</sup> Irene Redfield's case suggests another way of looking at the national reference of the juridically problematic body: her will-to-not-know, to misrecognize, and to flee her body by embracing the Liberty Tree suggests that she experiences herself as precisely not abstract, but as imprisoned in the surplus embodiment of a culture that values abstraction; and that her affinity for the bourgeois, the individual, the subjective, and the unconscious symptomatize her desire to shed her two racially marked gendered bodies in fantasies of disembodiment, self-abstraction, invisibility. The very vulnerability she feels in her body would be solved by the state's prophylaxis: identification with state disembodiment might suppress or deflect what Spillers calls the "pornotrop-

ing" of racist patriarchy.<sup>17</sup> I do not mean to say that embodied subjects in the culture of abstraction always seek invisibility; following Elaine Scarry and Spillers we see that abstraction from the body's dignity and the subject's autonomy has been a crucial strategy of political oppression.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, we see in "camp," in youth, in sexual, and in ethnic subcultures strategies of corporeal parody and performance that recast and resist the public denigration of the non-hegemonic "other" body. But sometimes a person doesn't want to seek the dignity of an always-already-violated body, and wants to cast hers off, either for nothingness, or in a trade for some other, better model.

In *Passing*, when women drink iced tea, shop, and have parties, and in *Imitation of Life*, when women make pancakes, picnics, and movies, the colonized female body is not abstract, but hyper-embodied, an obstacle and not a vehicle to public pleasure and power. At the same time, the erotic sensation released in the conjunction of women with each other affirms and reasserts the body, in a way more in line with the oft-used feminist and colonial studies interest in the transition from invisibility to presence, and margin to center. It is the logic of this dialectic between abstraction in the national public sphere and the surplus corporeality of racialized and gendered subjects—its discursive expressions, its erotic effects, its implications for a nationalist politics of the body—that I want to engage in this paper. What would it take to produce the political dignity of corporeal difference in American culture, where public embodiment is in itself a sign of inadequacy to proper citizenship?

*Imitation of Life*—which exists in three versions, the Fannie Hurst novel and the films of John Stahl and Douglas Sirk—addresses these questions by linking the struggles of an Anglo- and an African-American woman, both single with a daughter, to a tale of economic success: in this complex text the women fight for dignity and pleasure by mutually exploiting the structures of commodity capitalism and American mass culture. As we trace the various embodiments of *Imitation of Life*, we will see its "stars" transformed into trademarks and corporate logos, prosthetic bodies that ideally replace the body of pain with the projected image of safety and satisfaction commodities represent. From some angles these commercial hieroglyphs look like vehicles of corporeal enfranchisement; but we will also see the failure of the erotic utopia of the female commodity, as the success montage of one American generation can not reframe the bodies of the next.

Specifically, in every version of the text the white woman struggles to achieve economic success and national fame, while living in a quasi-compassionate couple with the black woman, who does the domestic labor; the black woman, who is also instrumental in the white woman's mastery of commodity culture, remains a loyal domestic employee, even in the wealthy

days. But once the women have leisure and security, their bodies reemerge as obstacles, sites of pain and signs of hierarchy: the white daughter falls in love with her mother's love object; the light-skinned African-American daughter wants to pass for white, and so disowns her dark-skinned mother, whose death from heartbreak effectively and melodramatically signals the end of this experiment in a female refunctioning of the national public sphere.<sup>19</sup>

For purposes of economy, my discussion of these narratives will be organized around the form of commodity aesthetics through which they trace the American female body: the trademark. Hurst's 1933 novel represents the business and life history of a white person named Bea Pullman, who assumes professionally her husband's name and gender after his death, and, "passing" for male, opens a hugely successful pancake franchise named "B. Pullman." The visual logo that accompanies her masculine signature, however, represents not the pseudo-body of its white, male producer (whose race and gender are deceptively presumed by the concealment of "his" given name), but is displaced onto yet another corporeal other, her African-American housemate, Delilah Johnson. As a visual icon, Johnson is known, not surprisingly, as "Aunt Delilah." In contrast to Hurst, Stahl's 1934 film associates the pancake business only with the trademark and brand name "Aunt Delilah." Miming the passing from novel to film, he honors her with both a logo and a huge, hieroglyphic neon sign; finally, Sirk's 1959 film isolates the white woman in the neon sign and the public body. Sirk renames the trademark characters, and some of their professions: Bea Pullman, "the pancake queen," turns into Lora Meredith, actress, with her name up in lights on Broadway. Delilah turns into Annie Johnson, and remains a domestic laborer, but with no cachet in popular culture. Thus more than names change in these interpretations of *Imitation of Life*: I will not attempt to do full readings of these texts, but to see how they collectively imagine the American body politic from the points of view of the overembodied women who serve it.<sup>20</sup>

## II. "B. PULLMAN" AND "H. PRYNNE": THE FEMININE USES OF CAMOUFLAGE

Fannie Hurst's *Imitation of Life* occurs in the midst of carnival. It opens in summertime, in Atlantic City, in 1911. But the crisis of the body we witness there has, at first, nothing to do with leisure culture, nor the service industry that lives on the cycles of its pleasure. Instead, in the novel's first scene we witness a paradigm moment of sentimental fiction, a daughter's private response to her mother's death. But the content of this moment is remarkable in its grotesque embodiment of the feminine:

"It struck Bea, and for the moment diverted her from grief, that quite the most physical thing she had ever connected with her mother was the fact of her having died. She found herself, crying there beside the bier, thinking of her mother's legs. . . . her arms and legs and breasts and her loins there, under the bengaline dress . . . stiff and dead."<sup>21</sup>

"There had been so little evidence, during her lifetime," she thinks, "of any aspect of her [mother's] physical life": and yet "the physical fact of [Bea's own] coming of menstrual age" (1) revealed to her the repulsive and upsetting fact that her mother had "committed the act of sex" with "that crumpled figure over there in the corner of the darkened parlor, his back retching as he cried" (4). This primal scene, of sex after death, is unbearable to Bea: her response is mentally to dismember her mother, to protect her after the fact from the embodiment that had made her whole, and therefore penetrable. This style of mourning, and of preserving the memory of the maternal form by breaking it apart in a kind of catalogue, is not only Bea's awakening to her mother's body.<sup>22</sup> It is also her initiation into sexual self-consciousness: mourning "had felt like wine" to Bea, "fizzing down into, and exciting and hurting her" (5).

The erotics of female identification, then, are here tied up with a sublime amalgam of pleasure, pain, and physical defamiliarization that comes from Bea's mother's death. Bea's attraction to this mix of sensations is reinforced by her father's subsequent domination of her life: not only is she, at 17, forced to replace her mother functionally in the household, but she is pressured into marriage to Mr. Pullman, a man her father chooses. This idea in itself does not upset Bea, who is rightly accused of "marrying marriage" rather than a man, for love (42). Marriage, with its usual transformations of a woman's name and sexual practice, is the conventional mode of female self-abstraction, and in marriage, Bea experiences abstraction doubly. While sex with Benjamin Pullman is simply a "clinical sort of something, apparently, that a girl had to give a man," "[i]t was amazing what feeling secure did to the front one put up in the world" (55, 57). Being fit with the false front and the mental prophylaxis of marriage also admits Bea into the world of "girl-talk," as she and the neighborhood women now speak frankly about deviously managing men and faking orgasms (58). This is to say that her entry into marriage provides Bea with a prosthetic identity, estranges her from her body in both an alienating and a pleasing way, and consolidates her relations to other women. Bea wishes that marriage weren't physically self-alienating, but this, she learns, is a fact about marriage. Her intuition is further confirmed by her father's tyranny: debilitated by a stroke soon after her marriage, his physical brutality to Bea throughout her entire life makes him an ever-present "symbol of littleness from which she needed emancipation" (177).

But there is something good about her association with men, and this is in their connection to the national public sphere: specifically the activity of national politics and of capitalist enterprise. Men sit around the bourgeois home speaking their political opinions, which Bea registers but has no interest in; but Hurst's narrator provides a counter-consciousness to Bea's mental limits. She repeatedly analogizes the personal choices Bea makes to the political agency of the American citizen: for example, "Thus in the year when men were debating whether a college professor was of sufficient stamina for Presidency of the United States, Bea lifted her face, which intimated yes, for the betrothal kiss of Mr. Pullman" (33). They marry two days before the election, in midst of a raucous political parade; the house in which she marries is bedecked with the double symbology of a wedding bell and the American Flag. Since these events take place before women had the national franchise, Bea's private acts are the only "votes" she has; and insofar as her later successes mark her *for other women* as a proto-feminist, this self-abstracting private event becomes, in retrospect, the first of a set of steps she takes into national existence.<sup>23</sup> It should be said that the historical and ideological pressure of feminism on American women's public self-presence explicitly follows Bea everywhere throughout this book; but, like Irene Redfield, Bea needs to see herself as acting without agency under the pressure of necessity, and has no affective relation to collective life, to politics, or history. Hurst stages this isolate sentimentality as a problem Bea has, a mental blockage symptomatic of her sex class.

Along with gaining closer proximity to the political life of the nation, Bea's affiliation with Pullman brings her closer to the capitalist public sphere.<sup>24</sup> Hurst's representations of the capitalist presence in American everyday life are quite institutionally specific, as if she had contracted to advertise commodities in her narrative the way Hollywood films do now.<sup>25</sup> But the status of brand names and well-known corporations in *Imitation of Life* isn't simply referential or commercial: by the turn of the century, product consciousness had become so crucial a part of national history and popular self-identity that the public's relation to business took on a patriotic value. As political parties became less powerful, and as capitalism became less local and more national, the imagined co-presence of a consuming public in the emerging and transforming mass culture became a central figure of America, and crucial for its intelligibility<sup>26</sup>; indeed, Robert Westbrook writes that around this time political parties began using the strategies of advertising to vitalize American citizenship in the political public sphere by characterizing it as consumption behavior.<sup>27</sup>

Like Bea's father, Mr. Pullman works for the great "Pickle and Relish Company." Daily he stands on "Amusement Pier" lecturing on "the life history of the tomato from the vine to the ketchup bottle," while handing out pickle stickpins and samples (13). His authorized biography of the

tomato, which exists in an ironic linkage to a plagiarized biography of Abraham Lincoln's life he also delivers (14–15), discloses a corporate strategy to posit the commodity form and the brand name as the last stage of natural and national growth. By 1911, this form of suturing nation and nature was also associated with the sexual and commodity desire traversing Atlantic City, an interpenetration that makes Bea feel uncomfortably sexualized: pictures of Heinz Pier, to which Hurst clearly refers here, reveal scantily clad advertising beauties in the space of national/commodity history and distribution, linking up food and women in a public erotics of consumption, leisure, and knowledge.<sup>28</sup>

This conjunction of leisure culture and its servants subverts the discriminations of the bourgeois domestic economy. The capitalist public sphere absorbs the erotic investments of bodies in proximity, of contact through public exchange, and even of information culture, which emerges here as the new history of the nation, seen through its commodities. Meanwhile, the conventional topographical distinction between the home and the work spaces of the bourgeoisie does not hold: when the family travels, it travels to company functions; when the family moves, it is passively "transferred"; and a side business Mr. Pullman runs, selling maple syrup to local hotels, takes place within the home's instrumental space. In addition, Bea attends to the little "economies" of domestic labor with the zeal of an entrepreneur: but she is a formalist, and needs to see the home she runs as a sentimental nexus of consolation and escape. Bea does not live a split between domestic ideology and practical social relations, but she sees it as her job to maintain and intensify its reality at the level of theory. Then tragedy strikes. Soon after her marriage, Mr. Pullman dies in a train wreck. Bea is pregnant, then, and gives premature birth to a girl, Jessie; she is also thrown into poverty, burdened by a child and an invalid father.

Simultaneously Bea is imbricated more deeply into separate spheres: the domestic/maternal and the public/capitalist. For her this is an impossible subject position, mapped out according to two mutually reified gender logics. Hurst stages Bea's mutation serially: first, her ether-inspired corporeal dissolution in the pain of childbirth evokes the sublimity of mortality the specter of her mother raised—". . . and when they started to try and amputate her legs by pulling them out from the sockets, she screamed, and there was the upper half of her separating from the something going from her . . ." (72). She emerges from this event reconstructed and regendered, in a new, maternal body. In the next chapter, Bea is startled out of sleep, as if the sleep of childbirth, inspired to look at her husband's business cards. They reveal graphically that she can assume Pullman's business and gender identity because they share a first initial, B (73). This initial solves a problem she's been having on the job market, where her bourgeois female body has been exposed to the indignity of being all wrong for all the public

positions she seeks. But the maple syrup business (run, suggestively, by H. Prynne of Vermont) is mail order, and so her female body would be suppressed, non-knowledge: Bea thinks of her paper transvestitism as simply a wedge into the capitalist public sphere, but it's an identity she never fully relinquishes.<sup>29</sup> Bea emerges, then, from the first stage of female abstraction, marriage, to the second stage, where identity is marked by labor and self-alienation. Maternal and masculine work works the same way on Bea's body, however—she is exhausted, anesthetized. Both labor in the family and labor for money absorb her libidinal energy, or, as Hurst puts it, "Countless little budding impulses seemed to have been nipped in the frozen garden of her expectations" (88). She nonetheless retains her theoretical commitment to producing an unalienated domestic scene: but her need to earn wages disrupts the separate spheres on which her theory was based, and she displaces her need onto the capitalist public sphere, where she goes from serving her husband's leisure to serving as her husband, in the leisure industry. The contradictions of Bea's position threaten to disembody her permanently, an outcome she both wants, and doesn't want.

For the next fifteen years, Bea "buckles herself" into the worker's body like a suit of "armor" (186). At first, she lives "on a minus sign" (93), selling maple syrup in the back alleys of Atlantic City. At the height of Bea's exhaustion, she walks up to an "enormously buxom figure of a woman with a round black moon face that shone above an Alps of bosom, privately hoping that the scrubbed, starchy-looking negress would offer herself" as a sleep-in-maid (91): this woman, Delilah Johnson, tenders the offer and comes not only to run the house, but to provide Bea with the candy and pancake recipes she soon turns into commodities, in search of a franchise and a fortune. Later, selling "Delilah Delights" brand pancakes and candies in hotels, and then in her own restaurants, Bea becomes more like a classic capitalist, increasingly distant from the public scene of consumption. As the brains and the name behind the business, Bea remains almost entirely behind the veil of the male moniker. In addition, Bea uses "Aunt Delilah's" body to stand in for her own. When she imagines Delilah as a mammy-like trademark, Delilah protests, and says she wants to dress beautifully, to create a stylish image inheritance for her daughter to remember her by (105). But Bea forces Delilah to play the mammy, and in this coerced guise she becomes the prosthetic public body of "B. Pullman," the store, and Bea Pullman, the woman.

Bea relies on Delilah to do much more than to protect Bea's body: the "social hieroglyphic" or trademark representing Delilah serves to create consumer desire for the products of the "B. Pullman" restaurants. As Stahl's film displays, when Delilah stands framed in the store's plate glass window making her authentic pancakes, the *mise en scène* of capitalist aesthetics merges with actual production. Bea relies on Delilah's double embodiment

as icon and laborer to engender public “need” for her commodity. Delilah can do this because she is a professor in the true religious sense, who trains “imitations” or “replicas” of herself in the “University of Delilah” (184): there, she teaches “femimesis,” or, how to commodify the “mammy’s” domestic aura, which each waffle, pancake, and candy she makes is supposed to install in the consumer, like a communion wafer. In Delilah the religious aura of the commodity and the everyday imitation of God merge, in an uncanny repetition of Marx’s analysis of how commodities become invested with soul and pseudo-agency: to Bea, this is imitation in the good, the best sense.<sup>30</sup> But Bea displaces onto Delilah more than her need to manage the public sphere. Delilah is also Bea’s private maternal supplement, raising Jessie and caring for her father. And finally, she is Bea’s wife and mother, the only person who touches her body during the 1920s, massaging her back and feet after the long day at the office. In short, Delilah solves for Bea “the corporeal problem of being two places simultaneously,” both in everyday life and in the capitalist public sphere (140). Because Delilah can “be” both places, Bea has to “be” in neither. In Delilah, Bea achieves the condition of prophylaxis she has sought since her mother’s death.

Never for a moment does Bea question her structural relation to Delilah: to Bea, their cohabitation is as a priori and untheorized as are their different places in the racial and class hierarchies of the dominant culture. Because Bea herself is so desperately liminal, masquerading as the difference between the white man’s name and the black woman’s body, she has no consciousness of her privilege. Rather, like Delilah’s mulatta daughter, Peola, Bea uses her perverse opportunity to capitalize on racist patriarchal culture, by creating a compensatory “body” to distract from the one already marked by the colonial digit. Peola “passing” creates a juridically fraudulent white body, while Bea incorporates public “persons”—companies and copyrighted trademarks—who sublimate history, and the violence of the colonized body.

Then one day Bea awakens to the distance she has traveled from the sensational body in which she might live. This is, in part, because fame and money eroticize her in the public eye, which is curious about how she pleasures her body under the stress of success. Second, she discovers the body as a site of potential pleasure because it is “sex o’clock in America,” and the New Woman of the 1920s reveals to Bea another way to negotiate the public female body: in an armor not of bodiless abstraction, but of cosmetic masquerade. And finally, because capitalist practice carries its own erotic charge, its processes of abstraction are homoeroticized by Bea: she is openly attracted to other women who engage in what she calls “the racy ingredient of competition” (244) within the national public sphere. These feelings are congealed when Bea meets Virginia Eden—a beauty magnate, her own name a hieroglyph (a means of passing) that condenses

the erotics of “sex solidarity,” the American/Jeffersonian *locus amoenus*, and a Jewish background (she was born Sadie Kress). Eden opens the erotic floodgates in Bea: dates her, makes her a business “proposition,” and seduces her into a contractual collaboration. “You and me ought to work together, Pullman. You make women fat and comfortable. My job is to undo all that and make them beautiful. You’re grist to my mill. I want to be grist to yours” (193).

Awakened in the garden of Eden, Bea then becomes an erotic object for her female employees (she opens a gym so that they might also turn their bodies into erotic armor, and they fall so in love with Bea, that her male secretary starts intercepting their “obnoxious” gifts and love letters [189]. But when their business deal falls through, Bea experiences the erotic pain of female alliance once again: for “Virginia Eden’s teeth were as pointed and polished and incisive as a terrier’s, and with them, when she sank, she drew blood” (201). Then, the feeling of being embodied and excited by Eden scares Bea. She begins immediately to hyper-heterosexualize herself and falls in love with an unattainable man, Frank Flake.<sup>31</sup> After this embodied interlude, she returns to the life of abstraction. For Bea has not finally attained her national position by identifying with women, or with anything sensual. She has achieved success, within the auto-containment of the commodity form, by reinforcing the very apparatus whose practices she flees: in hiding behind the colonial simulacrum of a “male” employer who owns the copyrighted image and labor of an African-American woman.

A trademark is supposed to be a consensual mechanism. It triangulates with the customer and the commodity, providing what W. F. Haug calls a “second skin” that enables the commodity to appear to address, to recognize, and thereby to “love” the consumer.<sup>32</sup> Bea repeatedly turns to this abstract erotics for love and protection. This is what Delilah is, and represents. And in this sense, Delilah’s fractured public identity—as herself, as an autonomous iconic image, as a servant of “B. Pullman”—foregrounds the irregular operations of national capitalism on the bodies of racially and sexually gendered subjects. In other words, at the same time as Delilah brings dispersed fields of exchange into proximity and intimacy, she also shows their non-analogousness. While Bea is protected by hiding behind Delilah’s tremendous public body, Delilah’s status as a living trademark takes over her own meaning and history: she married a bigamist and gave birth to a daughter cursed with Ham’s opposite—light skin in a racist culture; she escaped the South to protect her daughter from the most brutal forms of racism. But when Delilah dies, the press reports that “her people” love her because the popularity of her facsimile legitimated blackness in public white culture. She is also, the press says, a constant reminder to white “national consciousness” of the dignity of her race; during World War I she becomes a domestic icon of the doughboys, who dream of a safe

domestic political space after the most horrible of wars. It matters not to the public that she dies a most humiliating, lonely, and grotesque death, "in her huddle on the floor, a heterogeneous twist of pain, her back in an arch, her torso writhing" (319-320): for "Delilah" has become the trademark who lives on, interminably. Through her forced abstraction, and not her biographical person, Delilah reconfigures the capitalist and the national public spheres to include, even to foreground, the American class of overembodied, colonized subjects. In this she provides an alternative image to the logics of liberal culture. At least this is someone's liberal fantasy projection of what such a trademark might do.

### III. AUNT JEMIMA AND UNCLE SAM

It is, for sure, the fantasy condensed in the face and history of Aunt Jemima, whose aura in American culture Hurst borrows for "Aunt Delilah," in *Imitation of Life*. Aunt Jemima was introduced to America at the Columbian Exposition in 1893. This links her up with the origin of American progressive modernism, the alliance between industry and the state to produce new "frontiers" of production and invention, and the induction of advertising itself as an arm of American sovereignty: it was to promote this event, after all, that the Pledge of Allegiance was written.<sup>33</sup> A huge success, Aunt Jemima became associated with a line of new products that included the "skyscraper, the long-distance telephone, the X-ray, the motion picture, the wireless telegraph, the automobile, the airplane, and radium."<sup>34</sup> She herself was an example of state-of-the-art technologies: the invention of the "half-tone" printing process at the turn of the century that enabled advertisers to install a new realism in the human trademark; the emergence of a new "logocentric" style, which encouraged consumers to link products with personalities<sup>35</sup>; the invention of ready-mix convenience foods, of which her pancake mix is the first to "emancipate" the housewife.<sup>36</sup> She did not, however, contain the promise of further racial emancipation. As Hazel Carby's recent discussion of the Fair's contempt for African-Americans shows, the exoticization of Aunt Jemima would surely mark the limit of what the consuming public could bear, in the linkage of African and American.<sup>37</sup>

The "promise" of Aunt Jemima thus went much farther than household convenience: her condensation of racial nostalgia, national memory, and progressive history was a symptomatic, if not important, vehicle for post-Civil War national consolidation. At the fair she was embodied by a woman, Nancy Green, who lived in an enormous flour barrel. Periodically she would come out to sing and tell tales. "Some of her script was drawn from the words of the old vaudeville Aunt Jemima song, some from [pseudo-]memories of her own plantation days in the Deep South," and some

from her own invention.<sup>38</sup> The association of exotic, primitive women with pancakes and domestic consolation was reinforced by popular fantasy, as the renown of *Little Black Sambo* suggests. One other context is relevant to Aunt Jemima's phantom presence in *Imitation of Life*: the analogy embedded in the trademark's address to the notion of the bourgeois housewife's domestic "slavery." In one 1919 advertisement, for example, the copy is explicit: Jemima's pancakes were the last hope this side of Abraham Lincoln to maintain the union of the North and the South; housewives who buy Aunt Jemima will not only be emancipated from labor, but will keep the family together by keeping politics out.<sup>39</sup> In this way the trademark itself bridges the nuclear household and national history, along with helping to produce the kinds of historical amnesia necessary for confidence in the American future.

Something like this amnesiac activity is narrated in Hurst's *Imitation of Life*. The accumulated "pancake wealth" of the nation does not transform the injurious conditions of the national/capitalist public sphere. But since the commodity is the modern embodiment of the legitimate "artificial person," Americans in the text equate personal emancipation through it with shedding the collectively shared body of pain to gain a solitary protected self. This is Bea's strategy, which works so well that she ends up alone, enfranchised, but not empowered. But John Stahl's 1934 *Imitation of Life* reads the text's utopian potential. Without looking away from the culture of abuse that saturates even American leisure, Stahl imagines *Imitation of Life* within an affirmative female economy. This utopia is not the abstract "paradise" of heterosexual, natural bliss Steven Archer offers Bea (Claudette Colbert), on an island "elsewhere," outside of the frame; nor is it in sentimental womanhood, where differences dissolve through maternal identification—as in Delilah's (Louise Beavers) cry to Peola (Freda Washington), "I'm your Mummy, child! I ain't no white mother!" Instead, Stahl derives from Hurst's text the positivity of difference: of female households and workplaces that protect the hyper-embodied frame; of an unalienated capitalist public sphere; and an identity in labor that eases the psychic burdens of gender and race. These "spaces," however, are really temporalities, moments in time when certain possibilities coalesce. This means that the film's "solution" is also framed as failure: in Delilah's commercial and Peola's racial hieroglyphic, and the impossibility of their suture, in American culture.

Delilah enters Stahl's *Imitation of Life* by accident, misreading the address of an advertisement, and ending up at Bea Pullman's (Claudette Colbert) door. To convince Bea that Bea has indeed asked for her, Delilah (Louise Beavers) reads her the ad's text, which describes her own subject position in the marketplace: she's a "girl," "a housemaid, colored, not afraid of hard work." She says that she has been looking for jobs, answering

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in the commodity position too - it is an American identity  
at the end of the film

ads like this, but no one will take her, because she has a child, and the ads don't call for a child. Then she advertises her child: she's been "brung up right, not drug up, like most of 'em is." Peola comes in and performs for Bea: she says "Good Morning" in patrician diction, an act she has clearly practiced. While at first Bea protests that she cannot afford financially to succumb to Delilah's hard sell, seeing Peola induces her to revise the terms of the ad and to fold this female family into her own equally impoverished unit. No longer a "girl," Delilah becomes to Bea "200 pounds of mother fighting to keep her baby."

This scene is extraordinary in the way it shows Delilah textualizing, characterizing herself, in little sound-bites: it is apparently the lot of the marginal subject to self-commodify verbally, to objectify and promote her own qualities, in a culture that, corporealizing, presumes her insufficiency. Advertising rhetoric, then, starts to look like a mode of colonized discourse. Delilah's insertion of Bea into the generic slot of the white housewife who consumes "colored" domestic labor is misguided, however. To rent the abandoned Boardwalk pool-hall that turns into "Aunt Delilah's," Bea is forced to sell herself in roughly the same way. Without capital, as she later says, "All I had was talk."

These two contradictory structures mark the relations of Bea and Delilah in Stahl's film: in one mode, the traditional nomenclature and spatialization of the domestic worker in the private home still obtains, especially as the women achieve leisure. Delilah is always "Delilah," while the other is "Miss Bea"; when they can afford a spacious house, the "domestic" lives beneath, and the employer, above. In addition, as they gain leisure, their bodies diverge, becoming more socially proper to the public iconography of race, class, and gender in early 20th-century America. The African-American woman grows larger, and darker, and her clothes get slightly better; the Anglo-American woman becomes a vital "new woman," wearing corsets and bobbed hair and slimy things.<sup>40</sup> But during the first ten years of struggle to gain financial stability and public dignity, the women live in the closest of quarters. In physical style they are equivalent, dressing in uniforms appropriate to their work; then, they inhabit their bodies in much the same way—exhausted; and they are shot at the same respectful distance by Stahl. But the film occasionally violates its accent on their shared class and material difficulties. The recurrent success montage that traces Delilah's transformation into a trademark emits the same odor of racist appropriation that permeates Hurst's novel.

For Bea takes Delilah's pancake recipe, her maternal inheritance, and turns it into a business; she takes Delilah's face, and turns it into a cartoon. Stahl stages Delilah in this scene as a buffoon, a position which provides her an opportunity for ironic commentary. On hearing Bea manipulate the rhetoric of credit to bilk businessmen into advancing their wares, so that

she might transform a boardwalk pool room into a feminine domestic business space ("Aunt Delilah's Pancakes"), Delilah acts as a comic soundtrack, singing in a worried tone "I puts my trust in Jesus," as she washes the windows. But her disbelief in the efficacy of the capitalist logic she hears Bea using is turned back on Delilah too, as Bea aggressively frames and interpellates her within that logic.

When Bea asks Delilah to smile for the trademark sign, Delilah smiles a small and hesitant smile. But Bea forces her to assume and to freeze in a "blackface" pose, which she dutifully maintains long after Bea needs her, to Bea's great delight. Stahl shoots the huge face of smiling Delilah in extreme close-up, and uses shot-reverse-shot cutting back to her frozen, smiling, saucer-eyed face as if to underscore how mentally insufficient Delilah is to her situation in the white patriarchal capitalist public sphere. But the grotesque hyper-embodiment of Delilah in this sequence violates her own and the film's aesthetic codes: I feel certain that her graphic decontextualization is specially designed to allude to and to ironize Aunt Jemima, in her role as a site of American collective identification.

The film's interference with the Aunt Jemima in Delilah is reinforced elsewhere. After Delilah's visual degradation, we see her making pancakes in the store, dressed as her trademark likeness; then, the film depicts a mass of imitation Delilahs, originating in her human face and fulfilled in her neon sign. But these women, who are shown packaging and mass producing Aunt Delilah's Original Pancake Mix, are explicitly industrialized, associated frame by frame with the disembodied human labor that generates their "product"; bodies without heads, they are filmed in an expressionist and not a cartoonish mode. They are surrounded by history: they are produced in history.<sup>41</sup> And when Delilah's product finally makes it into boxes, which are shown repetitiously moving along the production line, the soundtrack refers to the humanity abstracted by and condensed into the commodity, playing a sharply escalating series of the musical phrase "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen," which is also featured in the very opening moments of the film, over the credits.

In Delilah, Stahl gives Aunt Jemima a body dignified by labor and inscribed by struggle; but, distorted by racist magnification, she is "very deceivin' as to proportion." Indeed, in this seemingly stereotypical guise, Delilah utters the film's most political sentences. In that sense too she is decommodified, an anti-Aunt Jemima. She ironizes the tradition of grotesque African-American representations in American consumer culture, which includes the distortions of the Hurst novel itself; and, most important, 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. When Peola explodes

in rage at being called "black" by Jessie, Delilah, on screen in uniform, tells Peola to "submit" to the cross her light-skinned father bore: and in an intense close-up that reflexively undermines the comic quality of the earlier caricature of her "trademarked" face, she faces the question of who is to blame for the pain of racist embodiment.

It ain't her fault, Miss Bea. It ain't yourn, and it ain't mine. I don't know rightly where the blame lies. It can't be our Lord's. Got me puzzled.

At the moment Delilah settles on her perplexity, she looks away from the people on the screen, and turns her face toward the camera. Thus the unspoken word in this speech is national, as she looks directly out at the audience: here, in her white, fluted chef's cap, she addresses her audience specifically as Americans. Delilah is generally read as an apologist for the discriminations of racist culture, because she argues that Peola must reconcile herself to the pain of her embodiment. Despite the manifest power of religious belief that ameliorates her own experience of racial violation, Delilah also engages in political analysis; in fact, this entire scene reveals, in brief asides, the rage at the other side of her resignation. Two comments in particular frame both Delilah's reading of her own history, and her desire to protect Peola from repeating it by way of spiritual and financial support. Just prior to Peola's first public outburst against identification with her mother's blackness, Bea and Delilah work in the store and fantasize about what they want for their lives, and the lives of their daughters. Bea comments that Peola is smarter than Jessie; Delilah replies, "Yesm. We all starts out that way. We don't gets dumb till later on." What is "dumbness" here, if not Delilah's name for the mental blockages to rage and pain—what I earlier called "the-will-to-not-know"—that distinguish the colonized subject? Delilah's personal wish is just to get off her feet; but before then she will make certain that Peola is prepared, financially and educationally, to become a teacher, never to do housework for anyone. Teachers are "smart": not dumb, not full of sublimated rage, not sentenced to the life of the body as Delilah is, although she says she accepts the burden of her frame as part of the Lord's work.

The irony, of course, is that Delilah can pass through American culture because she has given her body over to its representation of what her subject position is. Her very darkness, which over-embodies her in the national public sphere, also domesticates her, because she is entirely intelligible to the juridical satisfaction of the white mind. The film's pictographic move from her surplus body to her gigantic neon luminosity emphasizes her objectification: it always seems to be night in the sky behind her luminous body. In contrast, Peola's resistance to the official and popular rule of racial classification makes her body a different kind of obstacle. Peola would have

to choose to be "black," to submit to a colonial corporeal regime, according to her own agency. But to choose to be visible in a culture of abstraction, to be a racial hieroglyph in everyday life, would be to choose a form of slavery. She simply can't inherit her mother's strategies of passing, because she doesn't have her mother's body—as juridically defined, and culturally staged. She looks, and dresses, much more like Bea.

Thus one way of reading the racialized sign in this film is to see the contradictions, within its regime of visual representation, between the commercial and the personal racial hieroglyph: the cultural capital of the mother's public hyper-embodiment versus the juridically constructed enigma of the daughter's, which can and cannot be registered in the mirror and the film. Each racialized corporeality requires a special kind of self-licensing: thus Delilah looks forward to leaving her body completely, as it is so saturated by unrequited cultural fantasy; while Peola wants to be "white," which means she wants to relinquish one of her bodies, to become less meaningful, more American. Since Bea and Jessie share the same frame, the same color, the same class style, they will not have this problem, and can affirm themselves while choosing each other.

But the contradictory and fracturing logics of race here produce another form of homosocial fantasy, which requires relinquishing the individual body as the primary unit of social meaning. When Delilah asks Peola to be a good girl, and go to a high-toned college, we might think, as many critics do, that the film endorses the racial assimilation of African-Americans. But she is also asking Peola to understand and to live her class interests, as a member of a contested collectivity. Delilah herself did not have the privilege to do this in the 1920s; like many of her race class, she was dependent on the national market for "colored" domestic work. But for a film that takes place on the New Jersey boardwalk and then in New York City, *Imitation of Life* records almost nothing of American leisure culture, or the political public sphere; for a film that takes place during the Depression, we hear only fleeting references to unemployment. In contrast to the novel, which is manifestly national and institutional in its scope, Stahl's film doesn't seem to believe in the value of an abstract, coherent national or capitalist space. He finds America directly on the body, its surfaces; but the surfaces of the body are marked almost solely with collective signs, which map out the subject's vulnerabilities, the routes her pain travels. This kind of pain is not the individuating, isolating kind; it is the source of a political confederation, the public world women might make. But female alliance across race is not the film's solution to the fragmenting effects of American hierarchy. Rather, the film offers it as a first step, in effecting a shift away from the centrality of national identity as such. Delilah's funeral reveals on screen a concealed but vital and ongoing public sphere, within the black community. In contrast to the novel, where all of America melts into the public space

of mourning for Delilah, this funeral is run by the black churches and lodges that specialize, among other things, in ritualizing the passing of an individual person from a world where pain is a collective burden. The emergence of this suppressed locus of costume and ceremony isn't merely a species of colonialist "artefacting" on Stahl's part<sup>2</sup>; it deconstructs the simulacrum of "one" American public sphere, and reveals that the notion of one dominant culture is one of the culture's most powerful myths. What if *Imitation of Life* were told from Delilah's point of view? The film approaches this by excluding the elements of cultural life to which she has no access. And by having her speak from within the trademark, it creates a space for political agency that exists elsewhere, and here, in her death as well. As Bea's final embrace of Jessie under the neon gaze of Delilah confirms, one must recognize that the body wrought by pain, memory, history, and ritual is collective. It is not aberrant or objectively in excess. In so shifting the public meaning of the "overembodied" body, the Stahl text imagines a crucial victory over the abstract and individualizing lure of Paradise, whether in America or elsewhere. This anti-nationalist message is, paradoxically, brought to us by a national trademark. Perhaps this was the only voice to which the audience would listen.

#### IV. WHITE NEON, BLACK GOLD: THE SIRKEAN SYSTEM<sup>43</sup>

In the thirties versions of *Imitation of Life*, national nostalgia for a safe domestic space was played out in commodity culture through the production and transcendence of a black trademark. The idea was that public investment in a commodity form, with its humanoid skin and soul, would consolidate a nation shaken by a monstrous war and debilitating depression: and so Aunt Jemima, who had served so well after the Civil War, was "modernized" in "Aunt Delilah," displacing Uncle Sam. In the novel, this trademark is appropriated callously from the body of a black domestic worker as part of a white woman's emancipatory strategy. In Stahl's film this trademark is given public speech, and speaks from the political place of surplus embodiment and the personal rage of collective suffering. Twenty-five years later, Douglas Sirk pulls back the black trademark's curtain, and reveals the white woman hovering there: in one of the great *tu quoque* sequels of our time, his *Imitation of Life* exposes the form of the white woman to the commodification she has for so long displaced onto the black woman's body.

As in Stahl's film, Sirk's narrative of female commodification hinges on a woman's relation to publicity. Advertisements do much of the critical work of this film: the opening shot of Lora Meredith's (Lana Turner) face,

which is repeated later for emphasis, shows her bending over a sign that announces the "1947 Coney-Island Mardi-Gras." This frame reasserts the film's situation in Carnival, on the "fat Tuesday" of public culture that portends Lent's impending melodrama. But this film occupies the very public spaces excluded in Stahl's rendition—as if in a shot/reverse shot relation, Sirk shoots the boardwalk from the beach that Stahl never represents. Sirk puts "the masses" back in mass culture and condenses the national identity of their taste and their desire in the surplus corporeality of Lora Meredith. While in the thirties texts of *Imitation of Life* an ethic of bourgeois propriety motivated light-skinned women to escape the hyper-determination of the public body, in the fifties the culture so embraces spectacular things that to be American means to want more body, more presence. But since presence, in mass culture, is signified by the image, Lora Meredith's stardom merges her embodiment and abstraction—in a way peculiar to women but symptomatic of the gaudy culture at large. And so Lora Meredith becomes her own prosthesis, projecting herself into simulacral public spaces where the commodity, representation, and the body meet. That her fraudulence is America's has been widely discussed, by Sirk himself, and by every critic who writes on this film: my interest here is to show specifically how Sirk determines the female trademark, transforming its public iconicity, its stereotypicality, into a national problem.

The transformation of Lora Meredith into "Lora Meredith" involves a self-instrumentalizing contract with her director, David Edwards. The montage sequence in which he proposes to make her sexually and professionally generic involves photographically removing her body from his apartment, moving the shot across the public space he calls her "empire" and scattering her across the nation. In the ten years that this sequence covers, Lora's body becomes progressively reified: her name replaces Edwards's name in the lights, and increases in prominence; her face floats, separated from her body, amidst overlapping marquees; her image is delaminated from her face, and splayed on national magazine covers; and, toward the end, women in the audience mime her look, so that projection of her visual image is no longer necessary to transmit to us her dominion in the national/capitalist space of fantasy consumption.

Although the montage transmits a ridiculous brightness, and although all the evidence is that Lora is a shallow actress—since Broadway and Hollywood apparently seek only a "girl with a certain *je ne sais quoi* . . . that something [she] managed to get with the dog"—the humiliation to which Lora is exposed is mainly not professional, but domestic. The film establishes its disciplinary home economy in its very first scene, when Lora loses her daughter—now named Susie—on the beach. This loss introduces Lora both to Steve Archer (John Gavin), her soon-to-be-suffering lover, and Annie (rather than Delilah) Johnson (Juanita Moore), her

soon-to-be-suffering "maid": they themselves are linked by their spatial proximity to a policeman, whose job is also to find the mother who has lost her young blond child. Everyone in her household polices Lora, including the children; each pronounces a monologue that catalogues explicitly Lora's inadequacy as a lover, mother, employer—in part because she really does lie and self-deceive to further her career, but mainly because public life is "imitation" and private life is "real," where women are concerned.

Yet there is something odd and ambivalent and even masochistic about the family's compulsion to repeat the argument for domesticity. More than anyone, Steve Archer brings this message to Lora. When they meet, he aspires to hang his photos in the Museum of Modern Art—for example, the picture he takes of Lora on the Mardi Gras sign titled "Mother in Distress." But falling in love with Lora compels him to give up his dream, and to ask her to give up hers. He tells her: "What you're after isn't real." What's "real" to him is "the nicest looking green folding money," and sex, besides. When she says, "What about me? What about the way I feel?" in defense of her life-long dream to act, he replies, "Stop acting." (In a later scene, when she offers to give up Steve for her daughter's sake, as Claudette Colbert does, Susie repeats this: "Stop acting, Mother.") Yet Steve returns repeatedly to the scenes of her acting: twice we see him in loving audience, both on the stage and off. He is addicted to consuming her product: he says, "You know, I still have you in my blood . . ."

This dynamic of attraction, rejection, discipline, and performance has its uncanny "blood" repetition in the maternal relation of Annie to her daughter, now named Sarah Jane. Sarah Jane is light-skinned, an inheritance from her father, who "was practically white" (as is Susan Kohner the actress in fact, white). Throughout her youth Sarah Jane blames her mother (rather than, say, the state of the law) for her condition, and chooses a style of racial passing that negates her mother's "servile" mentality and manner, featuring instead libidinous, assertive physicality. Sarah Jane's racial passing is simultaneously sexual and theatrical: but in this she is typical of women. For in this film a woman who lives with difference—either gendered or racial—enjoys no prophylactic private sphere, no space safe from performance or imitation. This internal estrangement is as real for Annie as it is for her daughter. Annie comments that Lora's home has got to be better than the racist brutality of the South, but this is the closest she comes to saying that she feels at home where she lives. In any case, Sarah Jane mimes Lora in understanding that physical allure is the capital a woman must use to gain a public body. But this capital turns out to be as counterfeit for Sarah Jane as it is for Lora.

The writing on the wall in the scene where Frankie (Troy Donahue) beats up Sarah Jane for camouflaging the "trouble" with her mother (she tells Frankie that she's the daughter of rich, conservative parents; but the

trouble she has is maternal shame) stages Sirk's negative homage to Stahl's *Imitation of Life*. The empty store in front of which the young lovers meet sports a prominent FOR RENT sign, but this empty store will not provide a secure space for a female affective and economic unit. Rather, it reflects the brutality that takes place outside that unit—in the public space. Moreover the plate glass window that had contained the authentic embodiment of Delilah's icon now reflects the public truth of American culture: the word "liberty," reflected backwards off a marquee from across the street meets up with the word BAR. In conjunction—or in "disjunction"—they condense the story and the conclusion of both of the narratives Sarah Jane lives, in her Anglo- and her African-American frames.

After Frankie rejects Sarah Jane, she takes to the life of the white show-girl. She is not good enough to achieve the self-irony of mass culture: she earns no success montage. Instead, Sarah Jane's mode of self-instrumentality is to hyper-emphasize her body in the present tense of performance, in the mode of the naked gold figurine that is trademark of the Moulin Rouge; where she works. By making herself a thing, she takes over her own cultural objectification as a racialized subject, relying on male narcissism to separate her sexual "value" from her juridical body. Both of her performance scenes are extremely carnal, although opposite in their mode of allure: in the first, she dresses and sings raunchily about her need to embody herself sexually, so that she might avoid the fate of passive, feminine women who have "empty, empty arms"<sup>44</sup>; in the second, at the Moulin Rouge, she is one of a chain of indistinguishable mute showgirls in a chain on a conveyor belt. They mime *en masse* a scene of seduction, drinking, and intercourse. You might even say they mime a success montage, in its mix of seriality and repetition; however the success referred to in this sequence belongs not to the persons who embody it, but to the audience, whose mastery is one with the privilege of consuming. In contrast, the audience of Sirk's film is not exactly positioned like the public consumer of the female sexual fetish. When the film shows these scenes, it routes them through Annie's maternal eyes. Twice we and Annie see Sarah Jane in a sexual and racial performance: we watch Annie have an inverted primal scene, transfixed and sickened as her daughter does a "number." As with Steve and Lora, Sarah Jane is Annie's "blood": it is as if the light-skinned female body in performance is irresistible to its consumers, even when it produces pain, and not arousal of the theater's Aristotelian emotions or the girlie show's carnal sensations.

If Lora and Sarah Jane produce the "unreal" simulations, what does Sirk hold out for authenticity? I have already suggested that Annie and Steve, who police imitation with an unwavering moral passion, become implicated in female fraudulence by their addiction to it. Steve and Annie assume pain the way Lora and Sarah Jane want pleasure: and if the star-crossed women

overinvest in the ecstasy and value of being public objects, the star-crossed blood lovers turn their pain into its own kind of spectacle. In short, if the film spends its most explicit time on the "problem" of the prosthetic public female body, it also shows how the problem of the female body itself becomes a commodity.

The paradoxes involved in this double commodification come together at Annie's opulent funeral. As the final scene in the film, the funeral might look like a privileged site of authentic public display, as I have argued that it does in the Stahl version. For like Delilah, Annie has a secret non-diegetic life in the black community. Annie says plainly that this life has not made it on screen because, "Miss Lora, you never asked." The funeral scene at the church brims with pomp and costume: but the ornate procession seems to reclaim the potential for public spectacle to produce dignity within American life. And the song Mahalia Jackson sings, "Trouble of the World," describes the weary one's relief at leaving for the Lord's house, where presumably there is no back room or basement. Finally, the ornate procession itself seems to reclaim the potential for public spectacle to produce dignity within American social life. Compared to the rest of the film it is unfrenzied, measured, subdued. It is also the only time we see men in costume, as if perhaps signaling a patriarchal reclaiming of public spectacle. But as the procession rolls down the street, the camera pulls back behind a frosted window: the window reads "costume rentals."

This ironizing text is authentic, like graffiti. On the walls of consumer America, as in this film of *Imitation of Life*, public advertising seems to be the only "agent" of truth. Sirk himself has said that he intended to undercut the funeral, by making it bizarre and embarrassing; he also shot Mahalia Jackson deliberately to look grotesque. He couldn't understand why Jackson moved the audience, in her luminous cry for relief from her body; and, suspicious of public culture and popular expression, Sirk could not imagine that a representation of public female dignity might seem emancipating, after all the corporeal humiliation his characters endure.<sup>45</sup> Sirk preserves in his *Imitation of Life* the American loathing of the public body; he plays out, even in his own . . . irony, how the ethic of universal and abstract dignity embodies the citizens it wants to humiliate.

I have argued that in American culture legitimacy derives from the privilege to suppress and protect the body; the fetishization of the abstract or artificial "person" is Constitutional law, and is also the means by which whiteness and maleness were established simultaneously as "nothing" and "everything."<sup>46</sup> In *Passing* and in *Imitation of Life* Anglo- and African-American women live the effects of their national identity directly on the body, which registers the subject's legitimacy according to the degree to which she can suppress the "evidence."<sup>47</sup> One of the main ways a woman

mimes the prophylaxis of citizenship is to do what we might call "code-crossing." This involves borrowing the corporeal logic of an other, or a fantasy of that logic, and adopting, it as a prosthesis. The way women have usually tried this is heterosexual: but marriage turns out to embody and violate the woman more than it's worth. Thus other forms of bodily suppression have been devised. This is how racial passing, religion, bourgeois style, capitalism, and sexual camp have served the woman; indeed, in *Imitation of Life* this ameliorative strategy has become the "trademark" of female existence, across race and class and sexual preference.

What does this tell us about the potential national identity holds for the subjects it has historically burdened with bodies? We have seen that in modern America, the artificial legitimacy of the citizen has merged with the commodity form: its autonomy, its phantasmatic freedom from its own history, seem to invest it with the power to transmit its aura, its "body," to consumers. We have seen, in *Imitation of Life*, light-skinned women embracing the commodity's promise, although this embrace itself results in many different forms of embodiment. Sometimes the commodity becomes a prosthetic body, an apotropaic shield against penetration and further delegitimation; sometimes the body itself becomes the object of public consumption, protected by the distance between the image, performance, and actual form. But the films and the novel give the lie to the American promise that participation in the national/capitalist public sphere has emancipatory potential for the historically overembodied. First, the strategy of abstraction that distinguishes white bourgeois style "solves" the problem by disciplining and shedding the public body, which forces the woman to live with the torture of its perennial return. Second, the body of the dark-skinned African-American woman is apparently unabstractable on her own behalf. Even Aunt Delilah's nostalgic public form represents a history of violence that is simultaneously personal and national in scope. This is why the amelioration of religion is so crucial to the black mothers of these texts, for there is no imaginable space in America, not even in the most benign white woman's house, where she will see relief from the body's burden. In Stahl's version, Bea and Delilah do escape into the sisterhood of the laboring body, but once leisure is achieved they revert to the default forms of their culture. For light-skinned African-American women, then, the choice of public identity comes to be between two bodies of pain, not two possible modes of relief from indeterminacy.

There is a moment in Hurst's *Imitation of Life* that crystallizes the distances between the nation's promise of prophylaxis to the "person" and the variety of female genders it creates. At the moment before Bea has her first experience of intercourse with her husband, she goes upstairs to put on the nighttime garb of the virginal bride, on her way to the hymenal altar.

She has never before entered their "master bedroom": the "darkies" put it together, during the wedding day. Bea, frightened, thinking of her mother, catalogues the objects on Mr. Pullman's mantle.

Framed photographs of an exceedingly narrow-faced pair of parents, deceased. One of quite an aged aunt, deceased. A framed program of the Pleiades Club, the one on which Mr. Pullman was announced to read his paper on Abraham Lincoln. And of all things! Dear knows from where, the black girl had unearthed a picture which must, in some way, have got mixed up with his other belongings. A horrid cabinet-sized thing of a woman, which Bea turned face down, in stockings and no clothes, trying on a man's high hat before a mirror. With what seemed like actual malice, that picture had been propped up against one of the china pugs. Those darkies . . . (50)

At the moment when Bea is to leave her ignorant girlish body behind for the sexual knowledge of womanhood, she finds her husband's pornography. The "thing" of a woman represented there violates everything she knows about her proper New England husband; and Bea understands that this woman has preceded her in his fantasy life. Bea turns the picture face down because she doesn't want to face it. She wants instead to blame it on the "black girl" who set up the room; she wants to displace her disgust at the masculine embodiment of women onto the black women who serve her. I have suggested that Hurst's version of Bea habitually relies on black women to be embodied: but along with revealing her own racial and class instrumentality, the picture suggests a politically "malicious" correspondence between Anglo- and Afro-American women.

The "thing" of a woman the picture depicts is having a wonderful time. She is fantasizing in a mirror, which itself frames the genitaled trunk of her body for the husband's pornographic gaze. However, the text does not consider what the man wanted from the picture. Let us imagine, then, for a moment, what this woman might be thinking. Surely, her costumed appendages signify a fantasy of agency: I might assume a male body, or masquerade as another kind of woman. But the hat this "thing" of a woman wears is not just any hat: it is Lincoln's hat. The text clues us into this by referring to Mr. Pullman's speech about Lincoln: the one he plagiarized from the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. This 1911 article about Lincoln reminds us that he was for white woman suffrage, as well as reluctantly for the emergence of black slaves from property to personhood; the article also characterizes Lincoln as the most feminine of Presidents, because of his sensitive heart.<sup>47</sup> In conjunction with the prop of the hat, the woman wears most likely a pair of dark stockings. Perhaps she is enjoying imagining how an amalgam of races and genders might look, if legitimately embodied as

citizens, or even as President, within the national frame. Bea is certainly not thinking this: she is too busy blaming the "darkies." Or maybe the "thing" of a woman parodies Lincoln's promise, revealing the bodies of light and dark women to be "things" his proclamation did not liberate. Thus Lincoln's hat reminds us that the nation holds out a promise of emancipation and a pornographic culture both. And that, as Delilah says of Peola's picture, "It never done her justice."<sup>48</sup>

## NOTES

My special thanks to Andy Parker for conceiving of this panel, and to Corey Creekmur, Laura Kipnis, Michael Warner, Tom Stillinger, and many members of the audience, for their inspiring and challenging conversation.

1. Frank Presbrey, *The History and Development of Advertising* (New York: Doubleday, Doran and Company, 1929), 625.
2. Fannie Hurst, *Today is Ladies' Day* (Rochester: Home Institute, 1939), 3.
3. Nella Larsen, *Passing*, in *Quicksand and Passing*, ed. Deborah E. McDowell (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 149.
4. Larsen, *Passing*, 150.
5. Larsen, *Passing*, 148–149.
6. Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1987):77–80.
7. For an elaboration on the regimes of discipline (as concealment, as grotesque or carnivalesque display) that have expressed the bourgeois body, see Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986).
8. Deborah E. McDowell, "Introduction," *Quicksand and Passing*, xxvi–xxxii.
9. I take the notion of xenophilia (and much inspiration, besides) from Cameron Bailey, "Nigger/Lover: The Thin Sheen of Race in *Something Wild*," *Screen* 29, no. 4 (Autumn 1988):30.
10. Larsen, *Passing*, 225.
11. Larsen, *Passing*, 235.
12. Elsewhere I elaborate on how American "women's culture" constructs literary "modes of containment"—notably in sentimental and melodramatic narrative—that both testify to women's colonization within a racist/patriarchal/capitalist culture and mark the self-constructed obstacles to specifically political thought and action toward social change by bourgeois-identified women. See "The Female Complaint," *Social Text* 19/20 (Fall 1988), 237–259.
13. See, for example, Paula Baker, "The Domestication of Politics: Women and American Political Society, 1780–1920," *American Historical Review* 89, no. 3 (June 1984):620–647.
14. Some major attempts to dissect masculine/Enlightenment citizenship are: Ruth H. Bloch, "The Gendered Meanings of Virtue in Revolutionary America," *Sixties* 13, no. 1 (1987):37–58; Mary G. Dietz, "Citizenship with a Feminist Face: The Problem with Maternal Thinking," *Political Theory* 13, no. 1 (February 1985): 19–37; Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Public Man, Private Woman* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981); Moira Gatens, "Towards a Feminist Theory of the Body," in *Crossing Boundaries: Feminisms and the Critique of Knowledge*, eds. Barbara Caine, E.A. Grosz, Marie de Lepervanche (Winchester, MA: Allen and Unwin, 1988), 59–70; Joan B. Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988); Catherine A. MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989); Anne Norton, *Reflections on Political Identity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988);

Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988); Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, *Fortune is a Woman: Gender and Politics in the Thought of Niccolò Machiavelli* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); Iris Marion Young, "Polity and Group Difference: A Critique of the Ideal of Universal Citizenship," *Ethics* 99, no. 2 (January 1989): 250-274.

15. Powerful arguments against these quasi-objective appearances of masculine American political culture can be found in: Iris Marion Young, "Impartiality and the Civic Public: Some Implications of Feminist Critique of Moral and Political Theory," *Feminism as Critique*, ed. and introduced by Selya Benhabib and Drucilla Cornell (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 57-76, and Nancy Fraser, "What's Critical about Critical Theory? The Case of Habermas and Gender," *Feminism as Critique*, 31-56.

16. Casting the mulatta as an ur-figure of political and rhetorical indeterminacy is the perspective of: Jane Gaines, "White Privilege and Looking Relations: Race and Gender in Feminist Film Theory," *Screen* 8, no. 4 (Autumn 1988): 12-27, and Hortense J. Spillers, "Notes on an alternative model—neither/nor," in *The Difference Within: Feminism and Critical Theory*, ed. by Elizabeth Meese and Alice Parker (Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1989), 165-187.

17. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," 67.

18. Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 108-109; Spillers, *Ibid.*

19. The vast majority of critical work on *Imitation of Life*, which almost always reads the maternal and familial relations (to the exclusion of specifically political ones) as the central "problem" for which the narrative provides an answer. This is, in part, because of the generic (over)emphasis of film criticism, which marks this complex text as melodrama and therefore as generated by social contradictions within the family. This criticism tends to denigrate Hurst's and Stahl's texts, for "giving in" to sentimentality, and to elevate Sirk's more explicitly critical stance toward American culture. I think each side of these valuations is extremely limited. See Christine Gledhill's (otherwise excellent) "The Melodramatic Field: An Investigation," in *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, ed. by Christine Gledhill (London: BFI Publishing, 1987), 5-39; E. Ann Kaplan, "Mothering, Feminism and Representation: The Maternal in Melodrama and the Woman's Film, 1910-40," in *Home is Where the Heart Is*, 113-137; and Marina Heung, "What's the Matter With Sara Jane?": Daughters and Mothers in Douglas Sirk's *Imitation of Life*, *Cinema Journal* 26, no. 3 (Spring 1987): 21-43. Lucy Fischer's forthcoming introduction to her critical edition of Sirk's screenplay gathers the most comprehensive bibliography available on this complex text and moves beyond the auteurist and generic impasses of the criticism. See "Three Way Mirror: *Imitation of Life*," in *Imitation of Life*, ed. Lucy Fischer (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991).

20. Other crucial transformations within this "complex text" (the "work" in its three versions) also take place over time. For example, the domestic plot about the rivalry between the white daughter and the white mother finds three different resolutions: in the novel, the daughter marries the mother's love interest; in Stahl's film, there is no marriage and the two women "choose" each other; in Sirk's film, the love plot works, with the older woman settling in with the man. Also, the mulatta daughter becomes progressively pathetic, insufficient, and submissive to the dominant order over the course of the complex text. The aggregate narrative fate of both daughters, unable to benefit directly from their mothers' successes, suggests some obstacles to thinking/effecting a post-patriarchal female mode of inheritance in American culture, and constitutes a counter-narrative to the mothers' confidence in labor and capital's liberatory possibilities. I bracket these concerns here, focusing instead on the adult women, who are already living the overembodiment into which their daughters are only emerging.

21. Fannie Hurst, *Imitation of Life* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1933), 1, 5. The bodily cataloging to which I refer occurs throughout the chapter: this hybrid passage from its first and last sentences is its most economic formulation. Future references to the novel will be contained in the text.

22. The relation between cataloging the woman's body and national identity has been beautifully worked out, from the point of view of its service to patriarchal national cultures, by Patricia Parker, "Rhetorics of Property: Exploration, Inventory, Blazon," in *Literary Fat Ladies: Rhetoric, Gender, Property* (New York: Methuen, 1987), 126-154. Bea's strategies of female identification are ambiguously related to the patriarchal strategies of control Parker sees, because her will-to-disembodiment and abstraction proleptically subverts the procedures she mimics.

23. The social history of women's movement into the American political public sphere follows the half-conscious Bea through the novel: Hurst not only taps the history of suffrage, of women's emergence as citizen-consumers, and of women's increased participation in the work force during the World War I, but also the fear women in the Depression had that their ideological and material gains would be lost them. The bibliography on these coterminal movements is enormous: for general histories, see Martha Banta, *Imaging American Women: Idea and Ideals in Cultural History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987); Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987); Robert L. Daniel, *American Women in the 20th Century: A History of Women in America* (New York: The Free Press, 1989). For Hurst's reading of the complex movement toward female "personhood," economic, and sexual legitimacy during this period see Fannie Hurst, "Are We Coming or Going?" *Vital Speeches of the Day* (December 3, 1934): 82-83; *Today is Ladies' Day: A Crisis in the History of Women: Let us have action instead of lip-service,* *Vital Speeches of the Day* (May 15, 1943): 479-80.

24. I describe the national public space as fundamentally "capitalist" following Simon Frith, who argues that the notion of "capitalist culture" addresses the "ideological experience" of capitalism not fully accounted for by traditional formulations of economic practice. Simon Frith, "Hearing Secret Harmonies," in *High Theory/Low Culture: Analyzing Popular Television and Film*, ed. Colin MacCabe (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 53-70.

25. There is a story yet to be told about the way advertising appears differentially in novels and films of the 1920s and 1930s. Film historians show that very early on the frame of the movie screen, the shop window, and the product package borrowed each other's function in the circuit of production and consumption, and of creating social value. On the early history of cinematic and commodity coordination, see Jeanne Allen, "The Film Viewer as Consumer," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 5, no. 4 (Fall 1980): 481-499; Charles Eckert, "The Carole Lombard in Macy's Window," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 3, no. 1 (Winter 1978): 1-21; Elizabeth Ewen, "City Lights: Immigrant Women and the Rise of the Movies," *Signs* 5, no. 3, Supplement (Spring 1980): S45-S65; Mary Ann Doane, "The Economy of Desire: The Commodity Form in/of the Cinema," in "Female Representation and Consumer Culture," eds. Jane Gaines and Michael Renov, *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 11, no. 1 (1989): 23-33; and Jane Gaines, "The Queen Christina Tie-Ups: Convergence of Show Window and Screen," in "Female Representation and Consumer Culture," 35-60. Jennifer Wicke argues that literature and advertising carried on a similar (although less capital-intensive) mutual dependency earlier, at the turn of the century. See *Advertising Fictions: Literature, Advertisement, and Social Reading* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

26. Peter Dobkin Hall, *The Organization of American Culture, 1700-1900: Private Institutions, Elites, and the Origins of American Nationality* (New York: New York University Press, 1984), 209-281; T. J. Jackson Lears, "From Salvation to Self-Realization: Advertising and the Therapeutic Roots of the Consumer Culture, 1880-1930," in *The Culture of*

*Consumption: Critical Essays in American History, 1880-1980*, eds. Richard Wightman Fox and T. J. Jackson Lears (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), 1-38; Garth S. Jowett, "The Emergence of the Mass Society: The Standardization of American Culture, 1830-1920," *Prospects* 7 (1982):207-228.

27. Robert B. Westbrook, "Politics as Consumption: Managing the Modern American Election," in Fox and Lears, *The Culture of Consumption*, 1-38.

28. Vicki Gold Levi, ed., *Atlantic City: 125 Years of Ocean Madness*, text by Lee Eisenberg (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1979), 28-31.

29. "H. Prynne" is really "Hiram Prynne," a Vermont businessman who uses his initial in his business dealings for "Prynne and Company." I gather that the text posits a genetic relation between Hawthorne's Hester and Hurst's Bea: Bea "inherits" from Hester the tactic of giving herself over to the name of the father (the A, the "B.") in order to "pass" through public culture in a relatively dignified way.

30. Karl Marx, *Capital*, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1978), 320-321.

31. Earlier I linked Bea's tendency to link sexual desire with women (her mother), pain, and bodily abstraction: but the scary return of this form of desire in her bond with Virginia Eden may also respond to the "heterosexual revolution" that accompanied the emergence of modern consumer culture and the modern female consuming body. While capitalism made it possible to live outside of economic dependence on the nuclear family, the twenties witnessed strong ideological pressure on women to choose heterosexuality as a component of the new consumer narcissism. "Beauty culture" (and here Eden surely suggests Helena Rubenstein) was administered by women to women: but for men. See Mike Featherstone, "The Body in Consumer Culture," *Theory, Culture and Society* 1, no. 2 (September 1982):18-33; Rayna Rapp and Ellen Ross, "The Twenties' Backlash: Compulsory Heterosexuality, the Consumer Family, and the Waning of Feminism," in *Class, Race, and Sex: The Dynamics of Control*, eds. Amy Swerdlow and Hanna Lesinger (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1983), 93-107; John D'Emilio, "Capitalism and Gay Identity," in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, eds. Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 100-113.

32. W. F. Haug, *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics: Appearance, Sexuality and Advertising in Capitalist Society*, trans. Robert Bock, Introduction by Stuart Hall (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 50.

33. Robert W. Rydell, *All the World's A Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876-1916* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 46.

34. Presbrey, *The History and Development of Advertising*, 360.

35. Presbrey, *Ibid.*, 356; 382-384.

36. Arthur F. Marquette, *Brands, Trademarks and Good Will: The Story of the Quaker Oats Company* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1967), 137-141; Joseph Boskin, *Sambo: The Rise and Demise of An American Jester* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 139.

37. Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 3-6. See also Robert W. Rydell, "The World's Columbian Exposition of 1893: Racist Underpinnings of a Utopian Artifact," *Journal of American Culture* 1, no. 2 (Summer 1978): 253-275; Ann Massa, "Black Women in the 'White City,'" *Journal of American Studies* 8, no. 3 (December 1974): 319-337; Elliott M. Rudwick and August Meier, "Black Man in the 'White City': Negroes and the Columbia Exposition (1893)," *Phylon* 26, no. 4 (Winter 1965):354-361. For a discussion of how African-American women's particular marginality at the fair linked up to its production of the modern American/woman, see Banta, *Imaging American Women*, 499-550.

38. Marquette, *Brands, Trademarks and Good Will*, 146.

39. This ad is taken from Robert Atwan, Donald McQuade, and John W. Wright, *Edsels, Luckies, and Frigidaires: Advertising the American Way* (New York: Delta, 1979), 92.

40. While Stahl's *Imitation of Life* was vastly popular in African-American communities (Cripps, 303), its depiction of the reproduction of American racist and class hegemonies in the household of Bea and Delilah has provoked a long tradition of negative criticism. The paradigm text is Sterling Brown, "Imitation of Life: Once a Pancake," *Opportunity* 13 (March 1935): 87-88. Following Brown's example, William Harrison, "The Negro and the Cinema," *Sight and Sound* 8, no. 29 (Spring 1939): 17; Peter Noble, *The Negro in Films* (London: Skelton Robinson, 1948), 61-63; Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mullattoes, Mammies and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Film* (New York: Viking, 1973), 57-60; Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900-1942* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 301-303; Jeremy G. Butler, "Imitation of Life: Style and the Domestic Melodrama," *Jump Cut* 32 (1987): 25-28; Donald Bogle, *Blacks in American Films and Television: An Encyclopedia* (New York: Garland, 1988), 113-115. For a brief history of the film's production and reception, see Thomas Schatz, *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), 231-232.

41. Another facet of the film's cultural work in this scene is the metonymic linkage of Delilah to the body of white ethnic American immigrants. The man for whom Delilah produces her cartoon image is an Italian actor who engages in his own grotesque comic physical performance, complete with thick accent: Stahl shoots him as a direct parallel to Delilah, with Bea in the spatial center. Since Delilah is explicitly an "immigrant" from the South, her juxtaposition with him, and their equivalent service functions (helping Bea produce a business, performing slapstick comedy) signifies yet another relay the film makes among social marginalities in non-melting pot America.

42. Bailey, "Nigger/Lover," 40.

43. This is Paul Willemen's phrase and idea, founding *Screen's* revival of Sirk's reputation in the 1970s. Following this line, many cinema theorists and historians valorize Sirk's avant-garde exploitation of Hollywood's laws of genre: he is said to have worked so excessively within the melodrama as to have saturated it with irony (along with the American culture that requires its consoling release). While I don't disagree with this general reading of Sirk's political position, this section of the essay explores the limits of his irony, as it circulates around the female body. Paul Willemen, "Towards an Analysis of the Sirkian System," *Screen* 13, no. 4 (Winter 1972/3): 128-134; See Fischer, "Imitation of Life, for the extensive Sirk bibliography. My reading of Sirk's irony is more in line with that of Michael E. Selig, "Contradiction and Reading: Social Class and Sex Class in *Imitation of Life*," *Wide Angle* 10, no. 4 (1988): 14-23.

44. The lyrics to this song signify that the discursive, erotic, and political space between Sarah Jane and Annie is entirely an effect of Sarah Jane's "white" skin, which can approximate for her a fantasy of racial invisibility. "The loneliest word I heard of is 'empty,' and anything empty is sad. An empty purse can make a good girl bad, you hear me Dad? The loneliest word I heard of is 'empty,' empty things make me so mad. So fill me up with what I formerly had. Now Venus, you know, was loaded with charms, and look at what happened to her. What's around, she's minus two arms—could happen to me, no sir! Now is the time to fill what is empty, fill my life brim full of charms. Help me refill these empty, empty, empty arms." The first time we see Sarah Jane dance erotically to its score is in her bedroom—where, during the dance, she not only kicks a stuffed animal (a lamb) but steps threateningly near a record of *Porgy and Bess* strewn across her floor.

45. James Harvey, "Sirkumstantial Evidence," *Film Comment* 14, no. 4 (July-August 1978): 55. Here is the entire passage:

HARVEY: Or the funeral scene.

SIRK: The Funeral itself is an irony. All that pomp.

HARVEY: But surely there is no irony when Mahalia Jackson signs. The emotion is large and simply and straightforward.

SIRK: It's strange. Before shooting those scenes, I went to hear Mahalia Jackson at UCLA, where she was giving a recital. I knew nothing about her. But here on the stage was this large, homely, ungainly woman—and all those shining, beautiful young faces turned up to her, and absolutely smitten with her. It was strange and funny, and very impressive. I tried to get some of that experience into the picture. We photographed her with a three-inch lens, so that every unevenness in the face stood out.

HARVEY: You don't think the funeral scene is highly emotional?

SIRK: I know, I know but I was surprised at that effect.

46. Richard Dyer, "White," *Screen* 29, no. 4 (Autumn 1988): 49.

47. *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 11th ed., 703-710.

48. This is from the Stahl 1934 version.